

The following document is from:

Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet: A Guide for Educators

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Part III. Legal Issues – Internet Use in School

8. Academic Freedom

The Vision and the Reality

The following two pre-Internet quotes provide an excellent example of the vision and the reality of academic freedom in schools:

The Vision

Our nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely the teachers concerned. That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment, which does not allow laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom. ... The classroom is particularly a 'marketplace of

ideas.' The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth out of a multitude of tongues, [rather] that through any kind of authoritative selection¹.

The Reality

The effort to pull ideology out of schools is evident in battles over history textbooks. ... (M)ost students read carefully censored books. The pursuit of 'neutrality' often leads to censorship. The American Textbook Publishers Institute has counseled publishers 'to avoid statements that might prove offensive to economic, religious, racial or social groups or any civil, fraternal, patriotic, or philanthropic societies in the whole United States.' Textbook manufacturers appear to have responded in some cases by deleting materials reflecting cultural differences that might have offended someone. Interest group pressures from diverse ideological camps have resulted in the deletion of materials that would undercut the perception of an American monopoly on decency, as variously defined. Business interests have occasionally intervened in textbook selection to remove materials considered hostile to the "American system." American policy is sanitized. Books rarely report questionable government action.

... Perhaps the most striking feature of history textbooks is that they minimize the role of dissent in our history. Government decisions that appear decent or beneficial are often portrayed without any of the political controversy that created them².

Textbook Selection

Most states and districts have established careful processes to determine what information is provided to students through textbooks. This process frequently acts in such a way as to limit exposure to controversial viewpoints or subjects. As is outlined in the article written by Linda Starr of *Education World*, much of the material contained in textbooks has been carefully shaped to address the ideological concerns of the three largest textbook purchasing states, Texas, California, and Florida. As Starr notes:

That wouldn't be a problem if textbooks were what most of us assume them to be -- complete, unbiased accounts of "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." In fact, textbooks are actually compilations of selected facts, and the decisions about which facts to include -- and which to omit -- determine not only what your students learn but also how they interpret the information presented³.

Starr reports on the decision by the textbook selection committee in Texas to not approve a certain environmental sciences book which addressed ecological sustainability in a manner that was, apparently, not in accord with the ideological perspective of the Texas textbook committee members.

¹ *Keyishian v Board of Regents*, 385 US 589, 603 (1967) (cite omitted)

² Gottlieb, "In the Name of Patriotism: The Constitutionality of 'Bending' History in Public Secondary Schools." 62 *N.Y.U.L.Rev.* 497, 504 (1987).

³ Starr, L. Protect Yourself Against Textbook Tampering. *Education World*, 11/12/01. http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues229.shtml
Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet – Part III, Chapter 8, page 2

Notwithstanding the rejection of this textbook, there are not, to the knowledge of this author, any restrictions placed upon teachers in Texas to limit student access to information available through the Internet. This Internet material will likely address ecological sustainability from a wide variety of perspectives – some of which would clearly not be in accord with the ideological perspectives of the textbook selection committee members.

Controversial Information on the Internet

As the Internet grows in importance as a source of information, students will be exposed to a much wider range of information and ideas. Some of this material will clearly prove to be offensive to economic, religious, racial, social groups, civil, fraternal, patriotic, and/or philanthropic societies in the U.S. Some of this material may challenge the U.S. monopoly on "decency" or correctness, as variously defined. Some materials may directly challenge or raise questions about the appropriateness of the actions of the U.S. corporations or the U.S. government. Therefore, it is quite possible that student access to such information could ignite controversy in some communities.

When teachers use the Internet with their students, decisions about the appropriateness of certain materials are no longer under the control of school textbook publishers, the textbook selection committees of three large states, or other state or local school textbook selection committees. Teachers will bear the primary responsibility for the selection of materials and of assisting students in evaluating and analyzing the information.

Which students are going to be better prepared to be effective citizens in today's complicated world? Those who receive carefully sanitized information that avoids the presentation of controversial ideas? Or those who, under the guidance of effective teachers, have wide exposure to a robust exchange of ideas which facilitates the discovery of truths out of a multitude of tongues?

The kinds of information available through the Internet can assist teachers in achieving the vision of a classroom as a marketplace of ideas. Students will be exposed to a wide range of perspectives that have not traditionally been accessible in the classroom. The changes in education that will be brought about because of the expanded access to a wide range of information made possible by the Internet will be significant. In some communities, this may lead to some controversy.

Professional Development

Clearly, districts must place a high priority on providing professional development opportunities for teachers to prepare them to handle this new learning environment and to effectively develop and implement learning activities that address controversial subjects.

Most districts have policies on academic freedom. It should not be necessary for districts to redo these policies to address the Internet access. The following kinds of recommendations or guidelines can be made to teachers regarding the material they select for classroom instruction and can help to guide effective professional development activities.

- Teachers should select required or recommended material that is appropriate in light of the age of the students and that is the relevant to the course objectives.
- Teachers should preview the materials and sites they require or recommend students access to determine the appropriateness of the material contained on or accessed through the site.
- Teachers should provide guidelines and lists of resources to assist their students in channeling their research activities effectively and properly when they are accessing the Internet independently.
- Teachers should assist their students in developing the skills to ascertain the truthfulness of information, distinguish fact from opinion, and engage in discussions about controversial issues while demonstrating tolerance and respect for those who hold divergent views.