

# The AFCON Sentinel

Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

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## From the President **The Origins of Our Current Discontent**

Vicki Wood



Book challenges and bans are not new to this moment in history. What is new are the nationwide organizations pushing the message that teachers and librarians are united in an effort to brainwash children by making books with LGBTQ+ characters and content, as well as books featuring the darker side of American history, available to young people.

In 2014 some very smart folks in the book industry got together when they observed that books for children were not representative of the population. Only a small percentage of books featured children or families of color, almost none had a child with any sort of disability. They demanded representation and they got it because it's important that everyone sees themselves and their communities in books. Likewise kids who are part of the mainstream culture need to know about the myriad ways to be human in the world.

Representation blossomed; marginalized people and groups get to tell their stories, kids with hearing loss, autism, and facial anomalies become main characters and queer kids and teens have literature that shows they face all the

same challenges as their peers as well as unique challenges of their own.

Anyone who reads knows books can be powerful. They can make you feel seen, move you to empathize, open up a new point of view. Sometimes they just take us away from ourselves to another space, time, mindset.

People who seek to limit access to books both overestimate the power of books to “indoctrinate” and underestimate a child’s ability to synthesize information and develop an understanding of themselves and their world. I can think of no safer space than the pages of a book for a kid to explore the human experience.

## **SAVE THE DATE!!!**

*AFCON Annual Meeting  
featuring Mary Beth Tinker*



AFCON’s annual meeting will take place via Zoom on Saturday, November 4, 2023, from 10:00 a.m. to Noon. We are delighted to announce that youth rights activist **Mary Beth Tinker** has agreed to be the keynote speaker. Tinker was a plaintiff in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), in which the U.S. Supreme Court first recognized that students in public schools have free speech rights protected by the First Amendment. She has continued to speak out for youth rights ever since, including trips to Lincoln and Omaha.

**Sentinel Editor Emeritus Tom Black**  
**Retiring from Retirement**  
*(well, not exactly)*



Former AFCON Board member Tom Black is retiring from the NSEA-Retired Board of Directors, an active affiliate of the Nebraska State Education Association. Tom moved to West Point, Nebraska, in 1962 to teach high school social studies. He has been active in the NSEA ever since, including ten years as President of the West Point Education Association, over 20 years on the NSEA Board of Directors, editorship of NSEA publications, and service as Vice President (1998-2000) and President (2000-2005) of NSEA-Retired. He also served on the West Point City Council from 2014 to 2018. Tom was the founding editor of *The AFCON Sentinel* in 1997, was responsible for naming it in 1998, and continued to edit it until 2015. You can find all the issues here:

<https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/the-sentinel.html>



**AFCON**

[www.academicfreedomnebraska.org](http://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org)

The Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska was founded in 1988 to promote intellectual freedom in Nebraska education and research, including freedoms of belief and expression and access to information and ideas.

*AFCON Board of Directors*

*Vicki Wood, President*  
*Shee Covarrubias, President-elect and*  
*Communications Coordinator*  
*Peggy Adair, Secretary and Legislative Liaison*  
*Rod Wagner, Treasurer*  
*David Moshman, Policy Coordinator and*  
*Newsletter Editor*  
*Todd Schlechte, Webmaster*  
*John Bender*  
*Kari Bulgrin*  
*Nancy Comer*  
*Robert Haller*  
*Laurie Thomas Lee*  
*Wyatt Packard*  
*Regina Werum*

**JOIN OR RENEW**

*Rod Wagner, Treasurer*

If you are interested in defending and expanding academic freedom in Nebraska, we welcome you or your organization as a member of AFCON. Annual dues are \$120 for institutions, \$15 for individuals, and \$5 for students. Individual life memberships are available for \$150. You can pay by visiting our website at <https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/> Memberships and donations can also be made by check (payable to AFCON). Send check to AFCON Treasurer, 3901 S. 27th St., #47, Lincoln NE 68502. Organizational members are entitled to a representative on the AFCON board. We also have at-large board members. You may express your interest to the president to be considered for appointment to the board.

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**The AFCON Sentinel** is the newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska, published bimonthly in February, April, June, August, October, and December. Unless otherwise indicated, articles represent the views of the authors.

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## Nebraska Links

High school LGBTQ clubs challenged  
[https://omaha.com/news/local/education/school-board-member-parents-challenge-lgbtq-club-at-bennington-high-school/article\\_3e3e8d80-0931-11ee-a683-9791730c5601.html](https://omaha.com/news/local/education/school-board-member-parents-challenge-lgbtq-club-at-bennington-high-school/article_3e3e8d80-0931-11ee-a683-9791730c5601.html)

At Bennington's June 12 school board meeting, parent Tracee Baker said, "If this was 20 years ago and it was a club in support of the gay community, I would be all for it. However, with the ever-increasing list of things they could be — transgender, queer and/or questioning, asexual and two-spirit — you are now entering dangerous waters. Affirming children is not the answer and schools should not be the place where affirmation is occurring."

[https://omaha.com/news/local/education/not-about-sex-students-staff-and-experts-defend-lgbtq-clubs-in-omaha-schools/article\\_e1ac220c-0adf-11ee-a886-6b474ef16064.html](https://omaha.com/news/local/education/not-about-sex-students-staff-and-experts-defend-lgbtq-clubs-in-omaha-schools/article_e1ac220c-0adf-11ee-a886-6b474ef16064.html)

ACLU gets involved and reminds schools of their legal obligations

<https://www.aclunebraska.org/en/news/my-fight-gsa>

The law protecting LGBTQ clubs in high schools, which dates back to the Reagan administration, was originally intended to protect Christian groups. "No one can tell what free speech will protect. But we needn't worry about it protecting speech we fear or dislike. It surely will, but this is a price worth paying. In fact it's not even really a price. We're all better off in a system of free speech for everyone."

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/christian-conservatives-gay-straight\\_b\\_878843](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/christian-conservatives-gay-straight_b_878843)

ACLU Nebraska's new Executive Director is Mindy Rush Chipman, who spoke at AFCON's 2022 annual meeting. Replacing her as Legal Director is Rose Godinez, whose top interests include First Amendment rights and student rights. ACLU Nebraska (then NCLU) was a founding member of AFCON in 1988.

[https://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-courts/aclu-nebraska-names-new-executive-director/article\\_d5e7a098-0f91-11ee-b9c8-4bc17aa9198e.html](https://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-courts/aclu-nebraska-names-new-executive-director/article_d5e7a098-0f91-11ee-b9c8-4bc17aa9198e.html)

Unicam interim study resolutions: Sen. Murman said he would prefer Nebraska's public schools focus on "the basics," such as reading, writing and arithmetic. Social issues, he said, are best left to be taught by parents or churches.

[https://journalstar.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/state-senator-calls-for-studies-into-critical-race-theory-in-k-12-nebraska-schools/article\\_26ef9d56-3fae-5958-aed7-d31d262d0444.html](https://journalstar.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/state-senator-calls-for-studies-into-critical-race-theory-in-k-12-nebraska-schools/article_26ef9d56-3fae-5958-aed7-d31d262d0444.html)

LJS editorial: "Learning about the Civil War, civil rights and racism is different from critical race theory. Segregation, red-lining and the criminal justice policies of the 1990s still shape society. Learning about them isn't critical race theory. It's history."

[https://journalstar.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-7-12-hearing-must-be-start-of-open-conversation/article\\_0243397c-1cee-11ee-87dd-6f5ac332f26c.html](https://journalstar.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-7-12-hearing-must-be-start-of-open-conversation/article_0243397c-1cee-11ee-87dd-6f5ac332f26c.html)

Fremont library updates:

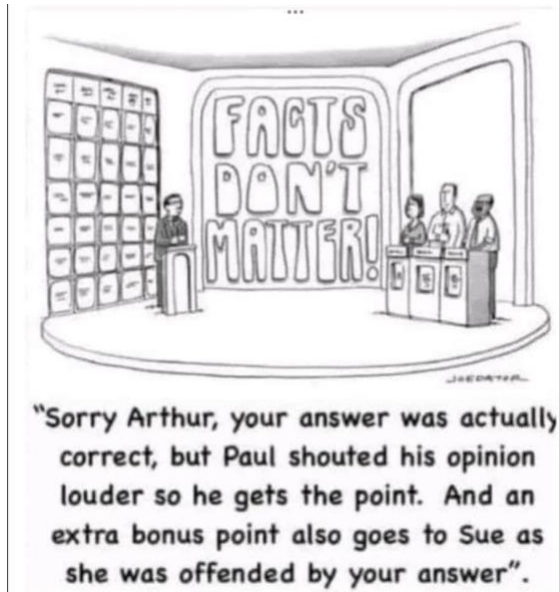
[https://fremonttribune.com/news/local/education/fremont-nebraska-library-policies-debate-july17/article\\_62de8290-21c7-11ee-ae72-cbc51ccda2b9.html](https://fremonttribune.com/news/local/education/fremont-nebraska-library-policies-debate-july17/article_62de8290-21c7-11ee-ae72-cbc51ccda2b9.html)

[https://fremonttribune.com/news/fremont-keene-library-agespecific-card-proposal/article\\_d2f88790-25b6-11ee-bdbe-b790e802496c.html](https://fremonttribune.com/news/fremont-keene-library-agespecific-card-proposal/article_d2f88790-25b6-11ee-bdbe-b790e802496c.html)

*The AFCON Board generally meets on the second Saturday of each month beginning at 10:00 a.m. and ending no later than Noon. Meetings are conducted via Zoom and are open to all. The next meeting will be September 9 (the Board will not meet in August). If you would like to attend a meeting, contact AFCON President Vicki Wood at [wood.vk@gmail.com](mailto:wood.vk@gmail.com).*

*Further information about the November 4 Annual Meeting featuring Mary Beth Tinker (see page 1) will appear in the October Sentinel. This meeting will be free and open to the public (registration details to follow).*

## National Links



A survey of college students asked, "If a professor says something that students find offensive, should that professor be reported to the university?" 74% said yes.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/free-speech/2023/07/21/students-likely-report-instructors-offensive-comments>

Some thoughts on intellectual freedom in education from the Executive Director of the Charles Koch Foundation

<https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2023/07/20/state-legislatures-cant-fix-campus-speech-issues-opinion>

Cancel culture restricts scholarly publication and denies authorship rights for authors deemed morally imperfect

<https://quillette.com/2023/05/25/campus-puritans/>

"If you want to understand what's happening in legislatures and electoral politics in Florida, in Texas, in North Carolina, and in other red and purple states, you have to look hard at what's happening on campus."

<https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/the-review/2023-06-05>

"I can't think of a worse way to create camaraderie among a diverse group of students than to institute an anonymous snitch system whereby they can aggressively police one another's speech."

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/bias-response-teams-are-a-bad-idea>

Moms for Liberty national conference

<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/moms-for-libertys-national-summit-5-takeaways-for-educators/2023/06>

Censorship of school plays: A playwright was startled when his publishing house forwarded him an email seeking "major edits" to his science fiction comedy "Crush," because, the email explained, "As we are a public school in Florida, we can't have gay characters."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/04/theater/school-plays-politics.html>

Book bans: "The community really listens when a student speaks out."

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/what-happened-when-students-led-fights-to-reverse-book-bans/2023/07>

Trevor Parker, head of the Advanced Placement program for the College Board, on the new AP course in African American studies: "In preparing for the second year of the pilot, we removed some of the readings that would make the course illegal in particular states. We removed particular topics that would have made it illegal for a teacher to teach this class.... At the same time, we're trying to make it a college level course that colleges will be proud of and will be willing to give college credit. That was our attempt, and we were not successful in that attempt."

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/college-board-revisits-contentious-decisions-edits-to-ap-african-american-studies-course/2023/07>

**Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska  
Board of Directors Meeting**

Via Videoconference  
June 24, 2023

Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison  
Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy Association  
Laurie Thomas Lee, representing ACLU Nebraska  
Dave Moshman, newsletter editor, policy coordinator  
Wyatt Packard, representing Nebraska Library Association  
Rod Wagner, representing Nebraska Center for the Book  
Vicki Wood, president, director at large

**MINUTES**

President Vicki Wood called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

MINUTES: A motion was made by Wagner, second by Moshman, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on May 13, 2023. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Wagner presented the treasurer's report. Balance on hand as of June 23, 2023, is \$5,036.25.

NEWSLETTER: Moshman reported the deadline to submit articles for the August edition of the *Sentinel* is July 24, 2023.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Adair reported LB753, Senator Linehan's "Opportunity Scholarship Act," passed and was signed into law by Governor Pillen. The Nebraska State Education Association has filed a petition to place a referendum before the voters in 2024 to repeal the new law.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION: Comer attended the June 2 meeting in its entirety. She reported the board seems to be attuned to carrying out its mission, with far fewer culture war distractions taking up time and energy, at least for the moment.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT: Wood reported she is working on a draft letter to state senators

explaining the role and function of libraries. She plans to send the final version to the senators before the start of the 2024 legislative session. Wood continues to communicate with Fremont library staff. The censorship issue has abated, and the library board is updating library policies. Wood reported she has received a request to provide AFCON information at the Nebraska Literacy Association's summer institute that will be held on July 12, 2023. AFCON board agreed by consensus that the latest edition of the *Sentinel* will be an excellent and current example of AFCON's important work. Wood plans to draft a letter to the UNO/UNL library systems that explains the work of AFCON and the benefits of becoming a member of AFCON.

ANNUAL MEETING: Tentative date for the 2023 AFCON annual meeting is Saturday, November 4, 2023, from 10:00am to noon. Wood will contact Mary Beth Tinker to see if she is available to be the keynote speaker. A motion was made by Lee, second by Comer, to authorize an honorarium for the keynote speaker.

The board discussed a number of possibilities for the 2023 Academic Freedom Award. The board will finalize annual meeting plans at the September board meeting.

RIGHT TO READ: The board discussed the possibility of developing a Right to Read presence in Nebraska. The board agreed to have a follow-up conversation about parameters and specifics at the September board meeting.

NEXT MEETING: There will be no August AFCON board meeting. The next scheduled AFCON board meeting will be Saturday, September 9, 2023.

There being no further business, the AFCON board meeting adjourned at 10:52 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Peggy Adair, Secretary