

The AFCON Sentinel

Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

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Exercise Your First Amendment Rights *It's Good for Your Health!*

Mary Beth Tinker

Recently, I was honored to speak at AFCON's yearly meeting about subjects that naturally go together, the First Amendment and health. As a nurse, I know that exercising First Amendment rights is as important as any other exercise. And it's good for the society and planet as well.

I've taken that message across the country on a "Tinker Tour," teaching students about rights, civics, and the Supreme Court case that I became involved with as a child, "Tinker v. Des Moines." One of my favorite stops through the years has been in Nebraska with AFCON—I like hearing how Nebraska's students and teachers are using their rights today.

When Plattsmouth High School students protested book banning, were they helping to reverse Nebraska's teen mental health crisis? I'm pretty sure they'd say, "It felt great!" Which is no small thing for today's stressed-out youth. Feeling great is "protective" of health.

When the Papillion La Vista school board refused to ban "All Boys Aren't Blue," about a gay Black youth, was that health promotion?

Apparently, according to the [Nebraska State Health Improvement Plan](#), since 50% of Nebraska's [LGBTQ youth have seriously considered suicide](#). It's a top priority of the state plan to "address depression, suicide and stigma through primary prevention, education ... and an increase of "protective factors."

Protective measures were on the mind of [Jason Mundorf, the Superintendent](#) of Kearney School District, when he defended the availability of LGBTQ books: "Kearney Public Schools serves a number of students in the LGBTQ community.... We try to support all students as these 'issues' can be at the heart of social-emotional, mental health struggles for many young people."

I grew up in Iowa during the "mighty times" of the 1950s and 60s, in a time so much like today. My father was a Methodist minister, and my parents believed in the "social gospel." My father did not shy from confronting racial injustice and the Vietnam War with his congregation.

When I was 10, my father was asked to leave his position at Epworth Methodist church. After that, it was Quaker meetings for our family, and for

him a job with the American Friends Service Committee.

That year, 1963, four Black girls in Birmingham were murdered by white supremacists. Horrified and grieving, we heard about a plan by James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin for people to wear black armbands at memorial services across the country. Doing that, I learned that taking action can help with grief, and that black armbands are a way to show it.



In 1965, in eighth grade, my siblings and I joined students in Des Moines to wear black armbands again, this time to school. Our message: to mourn the Vietnam war dead and call for a Christmas cease fire.

Five students were suspended, including my brother John and me. The ACLU challenged that, winning a victory for students' rights at the Supreme Court in 1969. During one of the deadliest years for the war, we kids felt the victory was overshadowed by the daily horror on the news.

Later, at community college and then nursing school at St. Louis University, I learned that health is physical, psychological, social and spiritual. I lived that lesson working with youth as a trauma nurse, school nurse, and hospital nurse. It became more and more clear that youth

themselves would need to use their rights to advocate and improve their conditions. Much of my experience highlighted racial disparities.

The [American Academy of Pediatrics describes racism](#) as a mental health struggle for youth that also has a devastating effect on child health overall. Are students who use their rights for racial justice advocating for health? Of course.

Did students in Omaha think that when they started the anti-racism group, "What Youth Can Do?" Maybe not, but they are improving youth health outcomes for generations.

We know that people often pay a price for speaking up, often to their own personal health. But even then, they are likely contributing to the larger society's health with their actions.



Mary Beth Tinker at a 2015 event at Harding Junior High School for the 50th anniversary of her suspension. Her sister Hope is behind her and her son Lenny is in back on the right.

When students at Crete High School questioned why the MLK holiday wasn't being celebrated, their teacher, [Nikki Menard](#), encouraged discussion and civic action. For that, she was disciplined. When she called out the racism that ensued, she was disciplined again. All of this caused her "waves of anxiety," as she put it.

But her students went on to write a letter to the School Board suggesting ways the district could celebrate the Martin Luther King holiday. Is Ms. Menard a role model for her students? As a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe, is she a role model for Native American youth? She states that

she is feeling less anxious now, happy and supported. And, she will always be a role model.

Students are using their rights in so many ways about so many issues, including war. The Muslim Student Association and the Jewish Student Union at Walt Whitman High School in Virginia issued a joint statement in October saying that “instead of arguing....we can assert one objective truth: the murder, rape, and exploitation of people—no matter their background, ethnicity, or political stance—is never justified.”

Did the students promote their health, and the world’s? Does knowing about it improve *yours*?

AFCON President Vicki Wood teaches parents how to stop book banning. She was recently honored with an award from the National Council of Teachers of English. Maybe she should also get an award from the American Public Health Association. And AFCON members should too!



Mary Beth (second from left in back) in second grade at Clarkson Elementary School in Des Moines

[To watch the annual membership meeting, including Mary Beth’s talk, CLICK HERE](#)

From the President **Tides Turn** Vicki Wood



In November, in many states across the country, the Moms for Liberty candidates failed to gain seats on school boards, signaling a pushback by voters against the culture war strategies they employ to remove books from school libraries. Their attacks on books and curriculum in public schools under the guise of “parents’ rights and community standards” has failed to generate election results.

In Nebraska, the results of their efforts have been mixed. On some school boards there has been pushback from other board members and students. Other boards have essentially caved and preemptively removed books, failing to follow their own policies.

We know that Moms for Liberty is a small group of vocal individuals who represent an equally small percentage of parents. Their strategies were effective for a time but free speech and intellectual freedom advocates are stepping up and speaking out. At a recent Nebraska Library Commission board meeting a group of parents and a council person from Fremont appealed to the board to create limits and guidelines for what Nebraska’s public libraries can and can’t purchase and reiterated the tired accusation that children are accessing pornography through library databases. They were met with an equal number of library advocates who spoke against censorship and in support of libraries and library professionals.

Last week's Lincoln City Libraries' board meeting saw its most robust representation of free speech warriors. Five individuals spoke against book removal, two spoke specifically about retaining the challenged book. No one, including the woman who challenged the book, spoke in favor of reclassifying or removing the book.

These victories don't signal the end of these divisive strategies. There are also larger movements to defund public education, censor and limit what can be taught in universities, and fire people for expressing unpopular points of view.

AFCON will continue to support academic and intellectual freedom in Nebraska as we move into our 37th year as an organization. I'm please to hand the president's position over to Shee Covarrubias, our first "parent president." Shee came to us originally because she was concerned about the removal of the book *Something Happened in Our Town* from the curriculum based on the complaint of one parent in the Papillion La Vista Community Schools. Shee has continued her advocacy work in AFCON and other organizations that support teachers, libraries and public education. Onward to 2024!



Bob Haller and Tom Black Lifetime Achievement Awards



When AFCON founder Mel Krutz first conceived the idea of forming a coalition of Nebraska organizations dedicated to intellectual freedom in education, one of the first people she approached

about this was Bob Haller, whom she knew as a UNL English professor. Bob joined in the effort, which led to several organizing meetings and ultimately, in February 1988, to the founding of AFCON, with Bob as its first president. Bob has remained an active member of the AFCON Board of Directors ever since and served again as president in 1996, in 2006, and briefly in the first few months of 2022. If being our first president makes Bob the George Washington of AFCON, then his subsequent terms make him our Martin van Buren, our Ulysses S. Grant, and our Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Tom Black was also among the founders of AFCON and was for many years a member of the board. His most noteworthy contribution is founding the *AFCON Sentinel* and editing it for over 18 years. Prior to his taking on that task, AFCON had published newsletters sporadically—a total of 13 issues in its first eight years (1988-1995). Under Tom's editorship, AFCON began publishing a quarterly newsletter beginning in March 1997 and it became known as *The Sentinel* beginning in June 1998. Tom continued to edit the *Sentinel* through June 2015 and made sure electronic copies were preserved even before it went to an all-electronic format distributed by email. You can now find copies of every issue since March 1997, the year Tom became editor, on the AFCON website.

Both Bob and Tom have been active on behalf of intellectual freedom in many professional contexts and in connection with a variety of other organizations. With these awards, AFCON recognizes their exceptional contributions to our work.

*--remarks by Dave Moshman at the
2023 Annual Membership Meeting*

AFCON

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
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Todd Schlechte, Webmaster

John Bender

Kari Bulgrin

Nancy Comer

Robert Haller

Laurie Thomas Lee

Wyatt Packard

Regina Werum

From the AFCON Constitution, Article I:

The purpose of AFCON shall be to promote academic freedom in Nebraska, defined as intellectual freedom in educational and research contexts. This includes freedoms of belief and expression and access to information and ideas. In pursuit of this general goal, AFCON shall:

1. support application of the First Amendment in academic contexts, including schools, colleges, universities, and libraries.

2. educate Nebraskans in and out of academic settings, citizens and professionals, parents and students about the meaning and value of intellectual freedom, intellectual diversity, mutual respect, open communication, and uninhibited pursuit of knowledge, including the role of these ideals in academic contexts and in democratic self-government.

3. assist students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and others confronted with censorship,

indoctrination, or suppression of information or ideas in academic settings.

4. act as liaison among groups in the State of Nebraska that support academic freedom.

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.

Local Links

Parental complaints about diversity-related class assignments in Waverly

https://journalstar.com/news/local/education/waverly-class-assignment-spurs-parent-complaints-plan-for-protest/article_0611defc-6ddc-11ee-b88e-5b2d7b3608a9.html

Overview of book banning in Nebraska

<https://flatwaterfreepress.org/surge-of-book-removal-requests-turning-nebraska-libraries-into-cultural-battlegrounds/>

Omaha school board declines to ban two challenged books

https://omaha.com/news/local/education/ops-board-votes-to-keep-all-boys-arent-blue-and-tricks-in-school-libraries/article_d1aecdc6-823c-11ee-8b40-f7aaff0df44f.html

Plattsmouth school board member Jeremy Shuey:

"Here you're trying to prepare them for a job and a career. And at the same time, you're

sitting there saying, 'Well, they're not responsible enough to read a book.'"

<https://www.ketv.com/article/plattsmouth-public-schools-votes-to-remove-1-of-52-books/45829276#>

National Links

“Killers of the Flower Moon”: What you can’t teach in Oklahoma about the history of Oklahoma

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/20/opinion/killers-flower-moon-oklahoma-history.html>

Book banners lose elections all over the country.

<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/liberals-win-hotly-contested-school-board-races-in-backlash-to-conservative-control/2023/11>

<https://academeblog.org/2023/11/08/maybe-book-banning-isnt-so-popular-after-all/>

Sex and gender in anthropology: A panel discussion scheduled at a major conference is abruptly canceled

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/diversity-equity/2023/10/04/anthropological-association-cancels-talk-about-sex>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/30/us/anthropology-panel-sex-binary-gender-kathleen-lowery.html>

Regarding claims that the anthropology panelists advocated ideas contrary to “settled science,” the science of sex and gender is far from settled and cannot be advanced by restricting debate

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/against-anthropologys-newfound-scientism>

Statement on campus protests regarding Israel and Gaza from the Academic Freedom Alliance

<https://academicfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Academic-Freedom-Alliance-Statement-on-Campus-Protests-regarding-Events-in-Israel-and-Gaza.pdf>

AAUP: “College and university leaders have no obligation to speak out on the most controversial issues of the day. Their duty is to protect the academic freedom, free speech, and associational rights of faculty and students.”

<https://www.aaup.org/news/polarizing-times-demand-robust-academic-freedom>

The 2023 volume of the AAUP’s annual *Journal of Academic Freedom* was published in November. As always, all articles are open access.

<https://academeblog.org/2023/11/09/journal-of-academic-freedom-explores-landscapes-of-power/>

Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska Board of Directors Meeting

Via Videoconference
October 7, 2023

Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison

John Bender, UNL Faculty Senate

Kari Bulgrin, Nebraska School Librarians Association

Shee Covarrubias, communications coordinator, director at large

Bob Haller, chief baker, director at large

Laurie Thomas Lee, representing ACLU Nebraska

Vicki Wood, president, director at large

MINUTES

President Vicki Wood called the meeting to order at 10:04 a.m.

MINUTES: A motion was made by Bender, second by Lee, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on September 9, 2023. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER’S REPORT: Wagner presented the treasurer’s report via email. Balance on hand as of October 7, 2023, is \$4,979.31.

PRESIDENT’S REPORT: Wood met with UNL faculty who are initiating a First Amendment Clinic in the UNL College of Law. Wood discussed intellectual freedom issues occurring in Plattsmouth, Papillion La Vista, Fremont, Grand Island, and Crete.

Wood served on a panel for 3rd year UNL law school students. The panel and audience had a 2-hour discussion on the recent uptick in attempts to ban books.

Wood has been helping to develop Citizens Speaking Against Censorship, a product of the Nebraska Library Association’s advocacy efforts. Citizens are trained to speak at events, attend

school board meetings, write letters and take other actions in support of free speech. Wood reported she has not heard back yet from the National Council of Teachers of English as to whether they pay travel expenses for award recipients. She will report to the board when she hears from them.

COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR: Covarrubias reported AFCON Facebook traffic continues to increase.

Covarrubias reported she met with Dave Moshman and retrieved all of his very well-organized AFCON historical documents, plus a marvelous secret trove of Ladybug magazines that lit up the eyes of a certain six-year-old.

Covarrubias contacted Avalon, a digitizing company, to inquire about digitizing AFCON's written history. Avalon offered to digitize documents for 14 cents per page, which Covarrubias estimates will come to around \$700.00 for the AFCON documents.

The board took up a tabled motion from the September 9, 2023 AFCON board meeting. The motion, offered by Comer with a second by Moshman, reads: "AFCON shall authorize up to \$1,000 to be used to digitize historic AFCON documents." Motion carried on a voice vote.

ANNUAL MEETING:

Wood reported Mary Beth Tinker has confirmed she will be our keynote speaker at AFCON's annual meeting on November 4, 2023.

Wood requested board permission to present two AFCON Lifetime Achievement Awards, in addition to the traditional AFCON award, at the AFCON annual meeting. A motion was made by Bender, second by Covarrubias, to authorize Wood to present AFCON Lifetime Achievement awards. Discussion followed. Motion carried on a voice vote.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE: Lee presented an interim report. The committee is communicating with contenders for the coveted positions.

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS:

Nebraska Center for the Book – Wagner reported via email: The Nebraska Center for the Book's Celebration of Nebraska Books event will be held

on Saturday, October 14 from 2:30 – 6:30 p.m. at the UNL City Campus Union (Regency Suite). No registration requirement. Many of the award winners will be present to receive their award and offer remarks about their book. There will also be books sales and signings during the reception following award presentations. For more details: <http://centerforthebook.nebraska.gov/programs/celebration.html>

Nebraska Library Association – Wood reported the NLA advocacy group is very active, meeting weekly, promoting libraries and the good things they do.

There being no further business, the AFCON board meeting adjourned at 11:18 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Peggy Adair, Secretary



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. All issues of the AFCON Sentinel are available here:

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

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