

The AFCON Sentinel

Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

Volume 27, Number 3

June 2023

From the President
Pretty Persuasive
Vicki Wood



Something happened in a smallish Nebraska town that frankly shocked and delighted me when I witnessed it a few weeks ago. After several months of rancor, and hour upon hour of testimony by citizens convinced that removing books from the city library was of the utmost importance to protect the young people of their town, the city council voted 5 to 3 to retain a book that many of them found personally distasteful. These council people would likely not describe themselves as liberals, nor were they prepared with a philosophy grounded in intellectual freedom and free speech to take on this fractious debate. I believe, in fact, that the council people of Fremont do represent their community and the diversity of political and world views found there.

What they did do remarkably well was listen. Not only did they listen to the very vocal group of citizens appealing to them to “protect children;” they listened to their constituents who told them in public testimony, in private conversations in the grocery store, and in emails that they didn’t like these attacks on their beloved library, or on the director and staff that they respected and trusted. They also listened to the library director

and other concerned Nebraska intellectual freedom advocates who reached out to them in a series of emails and phone calls, offering counterarguments and education about the role of libraries and the importance of representation and free speech.

In the end, it must’ve been a very tough call for a few of them, especially the single swing vote that came from a council member who rarely spoke on the topic.

There’s a tiny optimistic voice inside my head that tells me that persuasion, when done with compassion, logic, and an understanding of where people are coming from, can sometimes win the day. Kudos to all of the little voices that create positive change: the persuaders.

For links to news coverage of the Fremont book challenge, see page 3.



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 or by sending a check, payable to AFCON, to AFCON Treasurer, 3901 S. 27th St., #47, Lincoln NE 68502.

<https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/>



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.

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*

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.

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.

Editor: David Moshman
email: dmoshman1@unl.edu

Nebraska Links

Grand Island: ACLU of Nebraska, representing the Nebraska High School Press Association and a former Northwest student, sues Northwest Public Schools for censorship of student journalism:

https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-and-courts/aclu-files-suit-against-grand-island-school-that-ended-high-school-newspaper/article_4c514454-abc7-533f-b133-498c140cd030.html

Student at Grand Island Senior High gives his own graduation speech rather than earlier version approved by the administration

https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/student-goes-off-script-criticizes-grand-island-senior-high-in-commencement-speech/article_7fe7f504-f3ed-11ed-b672-372151c9ac22.html

Fremont: Library Board and City Council reject request to remove a book

<https://www.ketv.com/article/fremont-library-board-considering-removing-this-book-is-gay-from-its-shelves/43613150>
<https://www.ketv.com/article/fremont-city-council-votes-to-keep-book-this-book-is-gay-in-library/43844488>
https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/fremont-city-council-oks-keeping-lgbtq-book/article_7b82a94a-d290-5386-921f-40cd69f30e62.html

Papillion La Vista: School district faces multiple book challenges

https://omaha.com/news/local/education/papillion-la-vista-reviewing-numerous-challenges-to-school-library-books/article_4e9e272c-fa53-11ed-8131-63e112ae0415.html

Plattsmouth: School district removes dozens of books pending review; students protest

<https://www.1011now.com/2023/04/26/plattsmouth-students-protest-school-boards-decision-review-dozens-library-books/>
<https://www.3newsnow.com/news/education/plattsmouth-students-and-students-to-pack-plattsmouth-school-board-meeting-after-books-removed-from-high-school-library>

<https://www.3newsnow.com/news/education/plattsmouth-board-of-education-meets-for-first-time-since-dozens-of-books-were-removed-from-library-shelves>

The suspended books:

<https://www.ketv.com/article/nebraska-list-books-under-review-plattsmouth-school-district/43851325>

National Coalition Against Censorship letter to Plattsmouth notes that removing challenged books while a decision is in progress is contrary to existing Board policy and norms of good practice

<https://ncac.org/news/pending-review-nebraskas-plattsmouth-community-schools-improperly-removes-books>

National Links

College students demand protection from speech deemed “harmful”

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/more-students-endorse-an-expansive-definition-of-harm-colleges-arent-so-sure>

College presidents defend free speech

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/presidents-are-changing-their-tune-on-free-speech>

David French: “Attempts to suppress ideas and stifle speech come from both ends of the political spectrum. The faculty and administrators at Stanford, Cornell, Harvard and Chicago who are making their stands aren’t a collection of conservatives taking on woke college students. Instead, they represent the moral and legal center of the American academy taking on the extremes.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/opinion/free-speech-campus-universities-promising-news.html>

Amy Wax is a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania who claims she has been targeted by her Dean for expressing her views. This 90-minute webinar, sponsored by FIRE, begins with a 20-minute presentation by Wax, followed by questions, comments, and responses. There are substantial comments from Penn education professor Jonathan Zimmerman, who spoke in March at UNL.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icpnjF5MES8&t=4s>

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

Via Videoconference
April 8, 2023



Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison
Bob Haller, chief baker, director at large
Laurie Thomas Lee, representing ACLU Nebraska
Dave Moshman, newsletter editor, policy coordinator
Wyatt Packard, representing Nebraska Library Association
Rod Wagner, treasurer, representing Nebraska Center for the Book
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 Moshman, second by Lee, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on March 11, 2023. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Wagner presented the treasurer's report. Balance on hand as of April 7, 2023, is \$4,194.21.

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

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Adair reported AFCON-related bills have not moved further in the legislative process since the previous update in March.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION: Wood reported the state board has selected a new commissioner of education.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT: Wood reported she continues to communicate with those directly involved in protecting the Freemont Public Library from efforts to ban certain books. She will send an additional letter from AFCON reiterating our support and offering assistance if needed.

Wood sent written testimony to the legislature in opposition to LB441 and also attended the public hearing on the bill.

Wood attended the Johnathan Zimmerman lecture at UNL.

Wood and Packard developed and presented intellectual freedom training for all staff of Lincoln Public Libraries.

MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS:

Nebraska Library Association – Packard reported the NLA plans to put more effort into educating legislators and other decision-makers about how libraries function, in addition to ongoing advocacy efforts.

There being no further business, the AFCON board meeting adjourned at 10:57 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Peggy Adair, Secretary

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 June 10. If you would like to attend a meeting, contact AFCON President Vicki Wood at wood.vk@gmail.com. You can also contact her if you have potential agenda items or are interested in joining the Board of Directors.

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

Via Videoconference

May 13, 2023

Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison
John Bender, representing UNL faculty senate
Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy Association
Regina Werum, representing American Association of University Professors, UNL
Dave Moshman, newsletter editor, policy coordinator
Wyatt Packard, representing Nebraska Library Association
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 Moshman, second by Adair, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on April 8, 2023. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER’S REPORT: Wagner presented the treasurer’s report via email. Balance on hand as of May 13, 2023, is \$4,943.80.

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

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Adair reported LB753 is on final reading. LB753 is Senator Linehan’s “Opportunity Scholarship Act,” which will negatively affect funding for public schools, and which AFCON opposes. Other legislative bills AFCON is monitoring have not moved since the last AFCON legislative update.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION: Comer reported things are calm for the time being.

PRESIDENT’S REPORT: Wood reported she has communicated with members of the Fremont city council regarding the ongoing attempts to remove a book from the Fremont Public Library.

Wood met with Bob Rauner, a member of the Lincoln school board and a supporter of intellectual freedom.

Clark Kolterman has contacted Wood to nominate her for the National Council of Teachers of English Intellectual Freedom Award.

Wood taught a class on intellectual freedom and book bans to students of early education at Doane College.

Wood has been in contact with Kari Bulgrin and others regarding attempts to remove a number of books from Plattsmouth school libraries. Wood reported the Plattsmouth school librarian quit her job over the conflict.

Wood reported Lincoln city libraries have had two recent challenges over books on gender identity.

MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS:

Nebraska Library Association – Packard reported the NLA continues to work on advocacy efforts. They will meet with members of the American Library Association via Zoom on Monday, May 15, 2023 to discuss strategies to support libraries and intellectual freedom in Fremont and Plattsmouth.

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

Respectfully submitted,
Peggy Adair, Secretary

