

The AFCON Sentinel

Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

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From the President
**The Curious Paradox
of “Parental Rights”**
Vicki Wood



Those who seek to limit access to books and materials in public and school libraries argue that it’s their right as a parent to limit what their child reads and views. They get no (or very little) argument from intellectual and academic freedom advocates on this point.

Librarians have neither the right, nor the responsibility, to decide what materials are appropriate for any given child or family given the extremely wide spectrum of beliefs and values families may ascribe to across a community. The role of the library is to make a wide variety of materials available and let individuals choose what’s right for them.

So, doesn’t it logically follow that all parents have the same immutable rights? By removing certain books from the library collection, one parent is essentially deciding what’s appropriate for all other families in their community, thereby limiting the rights of other parents.

This paradox, when raised in the book banning conversation, usually is met with assurances that parental values are somehow universal, and it has become the job of a small subset of parents to “protect the children.” Those who want materials removed from libraries, essentially believe that they know, and have the right to act on, what is best for all families in their communities. This intellectual disconnect doesn’t slow the book challengers down. Intellectual freedom advocates will continue to agree with them about their rights, and also fight for the rights of all parents to decide what is right for their families.

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.

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.

Ten years ago
Christian Football in Nebraska



This article originally appeared in David Moshman's Huffington Post blog in November 2013.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-moshman/christian-football-in-nebraska_b_4289124.html

Ron Brown, assistant coach of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln football team, acknowledged at UNL's Big Red Breakfast this month that he reads scripture to his players daily. An article in the November 2 [2013] *Lincoln Journal Star* summarizes and quotes from his response to a question about [how he balances faith and football](#).

His answer is that he doesn't. Faith is not something to be toned down or lifted up to "get in the middle ground." Faith is not something to be balanced with anything else: "There's only one way."

And why when he coaches football must he provide his student-athletes with daily Bible readings? "Because I'm trying to coach their heart and soul."

"People say," he noted, "'Wait a minute, Brown. You're not at Nebraska Christian. You're at a land-grant institution, a state, publicly funded university.'" In response, Brown claimed that "the faculty, those professors in existentialism and philosophy are telling these same players, 'There is no God. There is no right from wrong.'"

That's where Coach Brown comes in: "I'm just deprogramming all that stuff. I'm giving them my

version, what I believe is the truth. Are we a university of diversity? A university of tolerance? Tolerate that."

Okay, I'm trying. Brown's conception of how a public university should operate, if I understand correctly, is that faculty should be free to do whatever they please, and coaches too: "If those professors want to live out their reality and their truth, they have a right to do that, they're hired to do that, but so am I."

Ron Brown: "The faculty, those professors in existentialism and philosophy are telling these same players, 'There is no God. There is no right from wrong.' I'm just deprogramming all that stuff. I'm giving them my version, what I believe is the truth. Are we a university of diversity? A university of tolerance? Tolerate that."

In a subsequent [letter to the editor](#), Thomas Kiefer, who earned his doctorate in the UNL Department of Philosophy in 2003, wrote that no formal class in existentialism has been taught in the department since about 1990. Most of his classes "did not raise the question of God's existence," and when the question did come up there was equal attention to authors and arguments on both sides.

As for telling students, "There is no right from wrong," Kiefer denied that any UNL philosopher, then or now, held any such view. He specifically mentioned the distinguished Christian philosopher Robert Audi, who was a professor at UNL until he was recruited away by Notre Dame.

Kiefer's observations hold for other departments as well. Nowhere at UNL, to the best of my knowledge, do faculty teach that there is no God or that right cannot be distinguished from wrong.

Ron Brown, Kiefer concludes, simply "made stuff up." This is not a favored approach to knowledge, either in the philosophy department or anywhere else at UNL.

Brown has perhaps misunderstood the concept of academic freedom. Faculty are free to develop and present their own interpretations and ideas in their areas of expertise because such freedom enhances the quality of research and teaching. This is not a right to do anything they please.

For example, the state of Nebraska recently provided funding for a study of the effects of climate change on Nebraska agriculture. The study was required to exclude human factors. [UNL rejected the funds](#) and announced a study of its own that will respect the academic freedom of the researchers to consider all relevant evidence and reach whatever conclusions they deem most justified.

Needless to say, UNL faculty who teach about climate science will be free to present and discuss the results of this study in their classes regardless of what politicians think should be studied and taught. But faculty are not free to teach whatever they wish about any topic they choose to a captive audience of students.

Contrary to Brown's expansive claims about the rights of professors, UNL faculty do not have a right to indoctrinate students in their religious (or anti-religious) views. Faculty are hired to teach and do research in philosophy, chemistry, engineering, and other subjects, and this is what they do.

"I would not be a man of integrity," said Ron Brown, "if I watered down what I believe." I have no reason to doubt that he is sincere, and I respect his freedom of belief and his right to express his beliefs.

But Ron Brown's goal of coaching "heart and soul" goes beyond what his job permits. As teachers and coaches we may try to reach students' hearts, but as employees of a public university it is beyond our purview to aim for their souls.



In 2023, the Nebraska Library Association is proud to present the first inaugural Nebraska Library Week! This event aims to celebrate and promote public, academic, and special libraries throughout the state of Nebraska to the public, government officials, library advocates, and stakeholders, to celebrate and recognize library workers for their contributions to their local communities, and foster a sense of community between library professionals and library supporters throughout the state of Nebraska. The theme for our inaugural NLW is "**Connecting Communities**", in honor of the passing of the broadband legislation earlier this year. The theme emphasizes the various ways in which libraries connect people to each other, to their local communities, and to the global community.

NLW will take place **November 12th – November 18th, 2023**

To sign up your library to be an official participant in Nebraska Library Week, please have a representative fill out [this](#) form. Libraries that fill out the form will be listed as official participants in promotional materials and be a stop on the Connecting Communities roadmap. Participants will receive a programming guide with suggestions of programming to promote and celebrate their library, in addition to receiving promotion for their library and events through NLA's social media platforms. You are also encouraged to design and implement your own unique, original programming to celebrate your community and library staff! You may submit programming

using [this](#) form to have your programs listed on our Nebraska Library Week Calendar.

To finish out our week, we will celebrate all our accomplishments at Library Prom in Hastings, NE on November 18th! Registration link coming soon.

More information can be found at [https://nebraskalibraries.org/Nebraska Library Week](https://nebraskalibraries.org/Nebraska_Library_Week) or by emailing NLW Chair, Lane Gibson, at lane.d.gibson@gmail.com

We look forward to seeing you there!

Local Links

Unicam: Hearing on parental rights, social-emotional learning, critical race theory, and more
https://journalstar.com/news/state-regional/education/nebraska-legislative-hearing-focuses-on-parental-involvement-controversial-topics-taught-in-schools/article_02877b22-2ff5-11ee-884e-d74d54ed4bb4.html

“I believe each individual parent has the right to decide for their children what they should read or not read. That’s a choice for you yourself to make and for you to make for your family,” board member Valerie Fisher said.

https://omaha.com/news/local/education/papillion-la-vista-board-affirms-decision-to-keep-all-boys-arent-blue-library-book/article_76ccc870-45a8-11ee-b4a8-2732ee28d49d.html

Student expression in Crete Public Schools
<https://nebraskaexaminer.com/2023/09/13/it-ended-up-being-racist-teacher-describes-resignation-from-crete-public-schools/>

National Links

Houston: After its 2023 takeover by the state of Texas, what is officially (and now ironically) called the Houston Independent School District (HISD) has been rolling out a phonics-based curriculum for teaching reading and eliminating libraries and librarians. In the words of its newly appointed superintendent, Mike Miles, “If you have to prioritize resources, then you want to get a teacher who can deliver the science of reading versus a librarian.”

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/education/article/hisd-libraries-discipline-areas-mike-miles-reforms-18209051.php>

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner: “You cannot have a system where you’re closing libraries for some schools in certain neighborhoods, while more-affluent neighborhood schools have libraries that are open and stocked with books and other resources.”

HISD teacher Sarah Rivlin: “I just think that the equity issue is pretty glaring. River Oaks, one of our really wealthy schools, just released a picture of their new, gorgeous state-of-the-art library.”

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/one-of-the-countrys-largest-districts-is-turning-school-libraries-into-discipline/2023/08>

Is there a free speech crisis on college campuses? UNL Ed Admin professor Elizabeth Niehaus provides a nuanced analysis of the issues.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2023/08/24/speech-crisis-narrative-wrong-and-harmful-opinion>

A new lawsuit from FIRE: “Whether it’s states forcing professors to teach DEI concepts or states forcing them *not* to teach concepts that lawmakers deem ‘woke,’ the government can’t tell university professors what views they are or aren’t allowed to debate in the classroom.”

<https://www.thefire.org/news/lawsuit-fire-sues-stop-california-forcing-professors-teach-dei>

“In 2016, at least five [California] campuses — Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Riverside and Santa Cruz — decided their hiring committees would perform an initial screening of candidates based only on diversity statements. Candidates who did not ‘look outstanding’ on diversity...could not advance, no matter the quality of their academic research.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/us/ucla-dei-statement.html>

A clever 2-minute video from FIRE about selective support for freedom of speech

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O67dGv5k1OU>

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

Via Videoconference
September 9, 2023

Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison
Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy Association
Shee Covarrubias, communications coordinator, director at large
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
Todd Schlechte, immediate past president, webmaster, director at large
Rod Wagner, representing Nebraska Center for the Book
Vicki Wood, president, director at large

MINUTES

President Vicki Wood called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

MINUTES: A motion was made by Moshman, second by Comer, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on June 24, 2023. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Wagner presented the treasurer's report. Balance on hand as of September 8, 2023, is \$5,082.44.

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

COMMUNICATION COORDINATOR: Covarrubias reported AFCON Facebook traffic has been increasing in the past few months.

AFCON DOCUMENTS: A motion was made by Comer, second by Moshman, that AFCON shall authorize up to \$1,000 to be used to digitize historic AFCON documents. Discussion followed. A motion was made by Moshman, second by Schlechte, to table the Comer motion until the October, 2023 AFCON board meeting. Moshman motion carried on a voice vote.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION: Comer reported the Nebraska Department of Education is working on making their website more user-friendly and less redundant. The board of education continues to focus on the right to read and on the science of reading.

POLICY COORDINATOR: Moshman reported Houston Independent School District is no longer independent; school librarians are being fired, school libraries are being turned into "discipline centers," and parents are up in arms. Houston, we have a problem.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT: Wood reported Mary Beth Tinker has agreed to be the keynote speaker at the AFCON annual meeting that will be held Saturday, November 4, 2023. Wood reported she has been notified she is one of four recipients of the National Council of Teachers of English Award that will be presented at the NCTE conference in Columbus, Ohio, on November 19, 2023. She is not sure whether her travel expenses are included. She will find out more information and report to the AFCON board at the October meeting.

A motion was made by Moshman, second by Wagner, authorizing Wood to send a letter on behalf of AFCON to members of the Nebraska legislature's education and judiciary committees. A draft of Wood's letter was previously circulated to board members via email. Motion carried on a voice vote.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE: Wood appointed Laurie Lee as chair of the 2024 AFCON officers nominating committee. Wood appointed Nancy Comer as a committee member and will solicit another committee member prior to the October board meeting.

AFCON AWARD: A motion was made by Lee, second by Moshman, to select the Kearney Public Schools Superintendent/Kearney School Board and Mary Beth Tinker as recipients of the 2023 AFCON Academic Freedom Award.

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS:

Nebraska Center for the Book – Wagner reported the Nebraska Center for the Book will hold their annual meeting Saturday, October 14, 2023, at the UNL City Campus Union. The day will include book sales, book signings, awards, and a reception. Everyone is welcome to attend.

Nebraska Library Association – Wood reported the NLA is working with the Nebraska School Librarians Association on advocacy efforts, and in support of a Right to Read website.

Nebraska State Literacy Association: Comer reported NSLA is collaborating with other groups including AFCON, in support of the right to read.

NEXT MEETING: A motion was made by Adair, second by Moshman, to move the October AFCON board meeting to Saturday, October 7, 2023. Motion carried on a voice vote.

There being no further business, the AFCON board meeting adjourned at 12:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Peggy Adair, Secretary

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Save the Date
AFCON Annual Meeting
Saturday, November 4
10:00 to Noon
via Zoom
focusing on censorship
in Nebraska schools and libraries

Further information about program and registration will be sent by email to the AFCON e-list in mid-October and will be available on the website:

www.academicfreedomnebraska.org



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