



THE

AFCON

SENTINEL



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A Quarterly of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

March 19, 1999

AFCON OFFICERS

Joseph Stimpfl
President

Spencer Davis
President-Elect

Mel Krutz
Past President

Peggy Williams
Secretary

Cathi McMurtry
Treasurer

David Moshman
Policy Coordinator

Tom Black
Newsletter Editor

Purpose:

To promote academic freedom, defined as intellectual freedom in educational and research contexts. This includes freedoms of belief and expression and access to information and ideas.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT—JOSEPH STIMPFL

As a newly elected president of AFCON, I am a relative novice concerning the specific issues that affect academic freedom. Since I do come to AFCON via the ACLU, I do understand the role of such an organization to be on guard for threats to the freedom of expression rights that are specific to education and the activities that contribute to and support education. Our members should be always vigilant on behalf of the educators of Nebraska and, by inference, all Nebraskans

We all know that this is sometimes a misunderstood and thankless task. We must defend books, processes, and people with whom we do not necessarily agree. But it is our singular mission and responsibility to remind all Nebraskans when a danger to their rights of expression and rights of access to information arises.

For me personally, an interesting example of this has been the hegemony of "political correctness" in the last ten years. Initially many of the ideas now cited under the rubric of "political correctness" were the welcome expression of uncommonly heard voices: something I support and rejoice in. However, with the expression of these voices and the assertion of the rights of their expression has come the less desirable suppression of other voices, often those with whom I do not agree. This has put me in a quandary. Am I happy

that opinions I have found undesirable are no longer commonly expressed? The answer is an unequivocal "NO."

I find the trend unfortunate and dangerous. If we discourage ideas in our academic settings, we cease to have the dialogue necessary to foment change. Attitudes are not "corrected" but rather reified by "non expression."

For me a very good example is racism. It has not suddenly gone away, but it certainly has been "dressed up" to the point that people are uncomfortable participating in public discussions about their attitudes. The result is that some of the unfortunate wrongheaded and stereotypical views associated with racism are accepted and reproduced in the closed circles of close personal relationships. They never see the light of public discourse.

It is not enough that it becomes inappropriate to use the word "nigger." The thought behind the construction of this vestige of the worst aspects of our heritage should be faced squarely in our classrooms and libraries. The paradox is obvious. Only when we have a free and open discussion in our academic settings can we hope to change things.

It is a worthy challenge to us all.

WELCOME 1999 AFCON OFFICERS

**Joseph Stimpfl, President; Spencer Davis, President-Elect;
Mel Krutz, Past President; Peggy Williams, Secretary;
Cathi McMurtry, Treasurer**

MINUTES of the AFCON Board of Directors

December 12, 1998: The Treasurer, McMurtry, reported receipt of \$307.46 from NELAC to defray costs of AFCON's 10th Anniversary Manuals. The President will send a thank you letter for its sponsorship.

The President, Krutz, reported on the calendar of meetings of AFCON's member organizations. Discussion centered on the role of AFCON to its constituent organizations, the necessity of its visible presence, especially in light of recent events (like the "Nappy Hair" challenge in New York. Moshman presented copies of *Newsweek* and *NEA Today* articles to share.

That discussion led to consideration of the need for a policy manual to provide direction for the president to give response, initiate action, or act. This would assure that AFCON could respond to challenges and situations promptly on behalf of the coalition organizations and members or could be a quick-response voice of reason in academic freedom incidents.

A motion was made that the AFCON Board create a structure to allow the president or his or her designee to be immediately active as well as proactive on issues. President Krutz appointed Stimpfl, Moshman, and Haller to a committee to explore and develop procedures and a policy for this response capability. Carried.

A motion was made that AFCON participate in at least (but not limited to) two constituent-member conferences each year. AFCON would continue its sales table at as many conferences as possible. Carried

Black handed out copies of the original AFCON Constitution with suggested revisions as proposed by the Constitution Committee (Krutz, Birky, and Black) for consideration at the January AFCON meeting.

Next meeting January 9, 1999, 10AM, Gere Library, 56th & Normal, Lincoln.

January 9, 1999: New AFCON officers and current Board members were introduced.

Moshman presented each member with copies of "Caught in the Crossfire" and "Intellectual Freedom."

In a discussion on AFCON Board meetings, Stimpfl suggested that we hold them from 9AM to 1PM in alternate months.

The Treasurer, McMurtry, reported the month's income at \$327.46 and expenses at \$687.64, leaving a balance of \$462.16. The monies set aside for the Lofthus survey

on censorship and challenges in Nebraska's public schools are \$1365.00.

Birky suggested that a reminder to pay dues be placed in the next issue of the AFCON Sentinel

Moshman and Stimpfl will check on getting a tax identification number to open an AFCON checking account.

Krutz moved, Lofthus seconded, that last year's officers list their responsibilities as an initial step to formalize job descriptions for a report at the next meeting.

Discussion followed on the AFCON Constitution report by the Committee of Krutz, Birky, and Black. Moshman addressed the issues of 1) quorums of four members instead of a majority, 2) circumstances under which officers could run for other offices, and 3) balance of power between the executive committee and the full membership.

Krutz said there is a need to address and to be proactive with the public. Discussion continued on a definition of academic freedom and other proposed changes in the AFCON Constitution.

Representatives of constituent organizations reported: Birky said AFCON is featured in the LEA Advocate. Krutz stated she still needs activities for the calendar. Stimpfl, ACLU-N, reported of concerns with UNL's process of dealing with sexual harassment charges against professors. Beckstead, NHSPA, reported the Student Freedom of Expression bill is in the Unicameral.

Next meeting February 13, 10AM, Anderson Branch Library, Touzalin & Fremont, Lincoln.

February 13, 1999: Organizational reports: ACLU-N: a UNL law student may file suit in his disqualification of participation in an internship program because of his long hair. NHSPA: Beckstead sent two students to testify on LB182, the Student Freedom of Expression bill in the Unicameral; John Bender, former AFCON President was principal spokesperson; Haller represented AFCON; Krutz, AFCON Immediate Past President petitioned a member of the committee individually. UNL Faculty Senate: Haller reported a University changing of by-laws for reassigning faculty and responsibilities is seen as an attempt to limit negotiating power of faculty; Moshman mentioned a new hiring policy, being considered, asks references and/or job candidates for administrative or tenured positions for events in their background that would prove embarrassing to UNL. NELAC: MacDaniels said Standards remain

an issue; Several agencies, consortia, and ESU's are after Goals 2000 funds.

Meeting schedule for AFCON Board: 10AM-1PM, second Saturday of January, February, April, June, September, and November.for the Executive Committee: alternate months.

Black led the Board on a continued discussion of changes in the AFCON Constitution. Final review will be at the April meeting. In March the Executive Committee will develop suggestions concerning its role in organizational management and in making public policy statements.

Lofthus is sending the new membership brochures to several organizations.

Krutz moved that AFCON organizational members seek information from their organizations about ways AFCON can fulfill its common goal with them through joint activities and report findings at the April meeting. Carried.

The treasurer, McMurtry, reported the month's income at \$571.50 and expenditures at \$99.89, leaving a balance of \$933.77. The Survey Funds are \$1365.00.

A motion to add Liz Quinlan, a college student, as a member-at-large to the AFCON Board was approved. A resolution to approach Carla Rosenquist Buhler as a member-at-large also was approved.

Black, AFCON newsletter editor, reported the next issue will be mailed by March 19.

Moshman was contacted by a Beatrice student concerning rights of students to publish in the high school newspaper. It was moved that Moshman and Stimpfl, President, draft a letter to the school principal on behalf of the student. Carried.

Moshman, AFCON Policy Coordinator, distributed drafts of his policy on Sexual Orientation. It will be reviewed at the April meeting.

The AFCON Executive Committee shall include the President, President-Elect, Immediate Past President, Secretary, and Treasurer.

Krutz reported on her interview by the *Omaha World-Herald*. (See Page 3.)

The Waverly school paper censorship issue was discussed.

Moshman circulated copies of the *Classroom Crusade* magazine which addresses threats to academic freedom, separation of state and church and freedom of expression in school contexts.

Next Executive Committee meeting March 13, 10AM; next AFCON Board

Use of A Book to Make Point Can Have Great Educational Value

by Mel Krutz

On February 8, 1999, a reporter from the *Omaha World-Herald* called to discuss a book recently objected to in Fremont, used there in kindergarten. It seemed to me to be a generally useful discussion and of sufficient length, on the merits of the book and its values, though, at times, I felt pushed toward a bias that was not mine, and hastened to object. The completed article, published on page one that evening, under the headline “‘50’s Book’s Use of Gun to Make Point Upsets Parent,” used little of that discussion, only two points, and I was sorry to find, the first of them to be a misquote. This is to respond to that situation, and to that misquote.

The situation was, according to his article, that a Fremont parent felt that the book *What Do You Say, Dear*, “a lighthearted book on manners, ‘had no place in today’s schools, though it may have seemed harmless in the ‘50’s’” In it, cartoon-like, the big cowboy points a gun at the head of the child cowboy and asks, “Would you like me to shoot a hole in your head?” The small cowboy answers, “No, thank you,” and rides away. The text is by Sesyle Joslin. The artist is Maurice Sendak. The article focuses only on the artist, though the text is not his, and, it seemed to me, the article seems bent on finding controversy.

The article reports that the parent felt that, “Guns should not be brought up in school, and kids have enough to worry about these days.”

To the contrary. What better place is there to discuss guns than in school, this sane environment whose goal is to teach logic and understanding of the world around us, where rational minds can examine with children what the violence of TV and the world they see presents? Here there is a regard for sanity. What better place to discuss anything than in school. Unless, maybe also at home. To not discuss it at all would be a sad neglect of responsibility. It is a good parent who accepts that responsibility. What crosses the eyes and minds of our children should matter to us. At the same time each of us also needs to be careful of not over-reacting, but rather that we find out the uses and purposes of a book, its values and reasons for being used, and why it was selected. Materials in schools are selected by professionals with selection based on professional criteria that has to do with intellectual development—with learning.

Had this parent visited with the teacher about the uses of this book? The article doesn’t say so. That would have been

a useful thing to do—it would have sought insight and solution rather than controversy. Communication matters. This page of this book represented an opportunity for a teachable moment—a chance to talk about guns and their uses, to talk about satire and its use by an author or by anyone, and to talk about family and school values openly, clearly, and logically. What a missed opportunity not to. To let the matter go, or especially to treat it negatively as a thing to cover up does a disservice to learning and to honesty.

Here’s a chance to note that:

-attitudes toward playing cowboys and guns might have changed since the publication of this book in the fifties. Here is an opportunity to learn about cultural and historic change.

-the artist of this book approaches this topic lightly, with humor, with satire. What a good opportunity to discuss what those things are and how they are used (starting with maybe knock-knock jokes and cartoons.)

-neither the intent of the author or artist, nor the intent of the book is violence. What a good opportunity to discuss what violence is, what reality is, what make-believe is.

Aren’t these the kinds of discussion that education is all about at home and at school? It is a wonderful classroom and school system which makes available a broad variety of materials and subject matter, finds time for discussion and probes children’s ideas in the process—yes, even in kindergarten—maybe even especially there.

As for being misquoted. The assumed quote was that “adults sometimes assign the wrong motives to Sendak’s words and drawings.” Our conversation about understanding literature included a discussion about how can anyone interpret anything only through the perceptions of their own background and experience, actual or vicarious. Two people reading the same material could, indeed, be gleaning different things from it.

That’s not a right or a wrong. It merely is. I would be hard pressed to focus on “adults” as a category in conjunction with Sendak, or to label Sendak in any other than a very creative artist, with a feel for where children are coming from. In my experience with small children, as a parent and as an early childhood teacher, I’ve not found them to be generally frightened by Sendak’s the “Wild Things” as the article suggests. In fact, they are more inclined to giggle and parade in delight with those comfortable nonviolent monsters. Maybe the whole issue of the *Omaha World-Herald* article needs another look.

News from *The Council Chronicle*, a publication of NCTE

Carol MacDaniels (NELAC'S representative to the AFCON Board) was presented the Nebraska Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Affiliate Intellectual Freedom Award by the NCTE Standing Committee on Affiliates at its Annual Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, in November 1998.

Information, materials, advice, and support for intellectual freedom issues is offered by contacting NCTE at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3848, or by calling Charles Suhor, NCTE/SLATE Field Representative at 1-334-280-4758.

The 1998 Doublespeak Award of the National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Public Doublespeak was presented to Justice Clarence Thomas of the U.S. Supreme Court "for his loaded, hypocritical, and inexact use of language in a speech to the annual convention of the National Bar Association in Memphis on July 29, 1998." "Thomas called his critics 'illiterate.' Suggesting that the negative criticisms of his conservative opinions were based on racism, he complained that 'the stench of racial inferiority still confounds my olfactory nerves.'"

An article in *Time* magazine credits his rise to the Supreme Court to "Republican Patronage with little interest in racial equality," according to *The Council Chronicle* February 1999. The Doublespeak Award is one no one wants to claim.

The NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak awarded its George Orwell Award to two people at the NCTE Annual Convention in Memphis in November 1998. They were Scott Adams "for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language. . . .as author of the popular *Dilbert* cartoon and books. . . .a farce to show the absurdity of managerial language and to Juliet Schor, a professor at Harvard University for her book *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer.*" This prestigious award is one readily claimed and an honor to receive.

Upcoming Events

NSEA: SEAN Conference March 27; NSEA-R Annual Meeting April 16-17; Delegate Assembly April 23-24; Leadership Conference July 26-30

TriState Family Literacy Conference April 27-28

NHSPA: Spring Conference May 1; Fall Conference October 25

NLA/NEMA: Annual Conference October 20-22

The AFCON Board
offers this reminder to individual and organizational members
to pay their dues for the 1999 membership year.

FOR SALE BY AFCON

T-shirts with a Paul Fell "banned books" design; Sizes M, L, XL, XXL, XXXL; \$15.00. Packaging and postage: \$2.00 each.

Note cards with a Paul Fell design; \$1.50; four for \$5.00. Packaging and postage: \$0.75 per packet.

Reader's Theatre Script of a TANGLED ISSUE: Student Freedom of Expression. \$10.00 buys the rights to produce and duplicate. Packaging and postage: \$2.00 each.

Send orders to Mel Krutz, 2625 Bluff Road, Seward. NE 68434-9801

AFCON

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Oakland, NE 68045.

Mailing
Address
Label

ACADEMIC FREEDOM COALITION OF NEBRASKA

HELP AFCON PROMOTE ACADEMIC FREEDOM

As a member of AFCON, you can help us

- ◆ support applications of the First Amendment in academic contexts, including elementary and secondary schools, colleges, universities, and libraries.
- ◆ educate Nebraskans 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.
- ◆ assist students, teachers, librarians, and researchers confronted with censorship, indoctrination, or suppression of ideas.
- ◆ act as liaison among groups in Nebraska that support academic freedom.

MEMBERSHIP (To become a member, send dues, organization or individual name, address, and phone number to Cathi McMurtry, 515 N. Thomas Avenue, Oakland, NE 68045)

Organizational Membership (\$100) entitles the organization to one seat on the AFCON Executive Committee and one vote in the election of officers and at the annual meeting, provides newsletter subscription for the board member to share with the organization's information director and reduced rates to AFCON conferences for its members.

Organizational Affiliation (\$25) provides newsletter subscription and reduced rates to AFCON conferences for its members.

Individual Membership (\$10) provides newsletter subscription, eligibility for office and for chairing standing committees, reduced rates for AFCON conferences, and one vote at annual meetings.

Student Membership (\$5) entitles full-time students to the same privileges as provided by the Individual Membership.

**AFCON ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS, PLEASE DUPLICATE THIS NEWSLETTER FOR YOUR MEMBERS.
INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS, PLEASE READ AND SHARE OR DUPLICATE FOR OTHERS.**

INVITE THEM TO JOIN AFCON