

Full Committee hearing on Intellectual Diversity

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Witness:

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Testimony:

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

My name is Diane Ravitch. I am a historian of education at New York University and have held the Brown Chair in Education Policy at the Brookings Institution for the past ten years. I served as Assistant Secretary for the Office of Education Research and Improvement from 1991-93, during the administration of President George H.W. Bush. Since 1997, I have served as a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, to which I was appointed by Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

I have written or edited many books about American education. My latest, "The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn," was published a few months ago. It is a detailed, closely documented study of the way that censorship has changed the content of textbooks in history and literature, as well as the passages used on standardized tests.

I wrote this book because of what I learned while serving on the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees national testing in many subjects. I discovered that testing agencies, publishing companies, state education departments, and the federal government routinely restrict the use of certain words, phrases, topics, and images. The process for screening materials for tests and textbooks is called "bias and sensitivity review."

As a result of my study, I found that the censorship of words, phrases, topics, and images is widespread throughout the educational publishing industry. Stories by well-known authors have been rewritten or deleted from standardized tests and from textbooks because a bias and sensitivity review committee objects to certain topics or language. No one can possibly object to the removal of material that expresses bias, but what few people realize today is that the educational publishing industry is using a new definition of bias and insensitivity that defies common usage. In many instances, words and topics that appear in the morning newspaper are routinely removed from tests and textbook stories. Many classic American novels and stories—like Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" or John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath"—would have difficulty passing a bias and sensitivity review board today.

The result of the bias and sensitivity review process is to dumb down educational materials, to reduce the vocabulary that children encounter, and to withhold from students a realistic portrayal of the world today.

Let me offer some examples:

As a member of NAGB, I saw test passages eliminated because they allegedly were biased or insensitive. In one case, the bias committee objected to a story because it mentioned Mount Rushmore. The committee said that the Indian tribe that lives in the vicinity of that national monument considers the monument itself offensive; it recommended that the story should be dropped.

In another case, a true story about a blind young man who climbed Mt. McKinley in an ice storm was eliminated. The bias committee said that students who had never lived in the mountains couldn't understand a story that was set in the mountains; that was considered regional bias. They also rejected the story because they said it was demeaning to blind people to treat this young man as an inspiring hero; blindness, they suggested, should not be treated as a handicap to be overcome.

Just this past summer, a bias review committee in New Jersey rejected a short story by the famous African American writer Langston Hughes because he used the words "Negro" and "colored person." Sorry, but those are the words that were appropriate when he was writing. The same committee rejected a story by NPR's Garrison Keillor because it referred to a student whose mother had died of cancer. The committee decided that this comment—set in the middle of an autobiographical story—was too frightening for 11th grade students to see.

Every mass-market publisher of textbooks and tests has compiled what they call "bias guidelines" or "sensitivity guidelines." These guidelines describe the words, topics, and images that they will not permit writers or illustrators to use. The testing agencies are more restrictive than the textbook publishers, but all of them remove words and topics that some pressure group is like to object to.

In Appendix 1 of "The Language Police," I compiled a list of over 500 words that publishers have told writers and editors to avoid.

Major publishers, for example, tell writers to be careful about using the words "America" or "American" because they suggest "geographical chauvinism." They also advise writers not to use the word "brotherhood" because it is sexist. Several publishers ban the word "Orient." And one must never use the words "manpower" or "primitive" or "Congressman."

One constant rule for writers and editors is that any word that begins or ends with the three letters "man" or "-ess" is unacceptable. As a writer, I almost always use gender-neutral words, but I hate the idea that a publisher can tell me that I can never refer to mankind or an actress. That choice should be the writer's. When David Brinkley died recently, the New York Times ran a tribute to him called "David Brinkley, Anchorman," but that headline could not be printed in a textbook. When the Academy Awards offers Oscars for Best Actress, as they do every year, they are violating the rules of the textbook industry.

When a bias committee encounters words like these, they change them or delete them, regardless of the purposes of the author. Textbook publishers and testing agencies fault classic literature because writers of earlier centuries used words that are today considered objectionable. The president of a major testing company told the assessment development committee of NAGB that "Everything written before 1970 was either racially biased or gender biased."

The pressure groups that demand censorship of textbooks and test passages do not come from one end of the political spectrum. They are rightwing, leftwing, and every other kind of wing. Anyone with a strong objection is likely to get a passage deleted or a story dropped if they object loud enough and long enough.

The story gets worse when you consider the topics that are routinely banished from tests and frequently removed from textbooks as well. The test contractor who was preparing the voluntary national test in reading gave our NAGB committee a package of guidelines

that told us which topics are unacceptable. Here are a few of them: Scary creatures like rats, mice, snakes, and roaches; disease; evolution; expensive consumer goods; magic and witchcraft; personal appearance, such as height and weight; politics; slavery; racial prejudice; fables; Halloween; religion; social problems; violence; someone losing their job; catastrophes like earthquakes and fires; poverty; or any references to junk food.

The rationale for excluding so many topics--and this is just a sampling—is that unpleasant topics might upset children, and they won't be able to do their best on the test. But, in the absence of any research to demonstrate the need to banish so many topics, the likelier explanation is that these issues upset grown-ups. There are various groups that consider these topics highly controversial, and they don't want children to be exposed to them. As I show in "The Language Police," small groups from very conservative religious backgrounds have objected to any mention of evolution, fossils, dinosaurs, witches, fantasy, or disobedient children in textbooks or tests. They have successfully intimidated publishers and state testing agencies to comply with their wishes.

The Harry Potter books are the most popular books in the United States. But they are also the most banned books in the U.S. because they prominently feature witches, witchcraft, fantasy, disobedient children, and a dysfunctional family. These are themes that publishers avoid. For that matter, a trio of witches appears in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and there is quite a long tradition of fantasy, witches, disobedient children and other forbidden themes in fairy tales and lots of other classic literature.

Yet because of the objections of people who hold strong religious and political views, stories that contain these topics are routinely screened out of textbooks to protect our nation's children. Are they protected? Of course not. They watch television and movies, where they see far worse things than witches and dinosaurs. The net result of this regime of censorship is simply to make the textbooks and tests banal and boring, thus reducing the possibility for getting children excited about what they read.

Now, it is not my intention to blame the textbook publishers or testing agencies as the primary culprits. They don't want a bad product. They want to sell books and tests. To do so, they must avoid controversy. They cannot afford to have some group of people picketing at the state textbook hearing and stigmatizing their product as racist, sexist, dangerous, or extremist. They may not like to censor their books, but they have to do it to sell their books in states that have a state adoption process. By now, the publishers are so used to excluding stories in which women are nurturing mothers and deleting photographs of poverty that they just assume that there is no other way to publish a textbook. This reign of censorship and sensitivity is now the way things are done.

The root cause of the censorship that I describe is the current situation in which a score of states screen, select, and buy textbooks for the entire state. The two most important states in this regard, because of the size of their student enrollment, are California and Texas.

These two states enroll about 20% of the nation's student population. They call the tune, and the publishers dance.

Because of the power of these two states, the entire textbook publishing industry is a warped market. Instead of a marketplace with millions of consumers, the market is dominated by the decisions of these two states.

For a textbook publisher even to compete in California or Texas, they must invest millions of dollars upfront in a speculative product. If they don't win a contract, they may go under.

The problem with this situation is two-fold.

First, it has provided a convenient bottleneck where pressure groups from across the political spectrum—whether representing feminists, anti-evolutionists, or some other assertive groups—can intimidate publishers and get them to revise their books. To avoid tangling with these groups, publishers have rewritten their textbooks and now routinely censor out what they know will be objectionable to any of these groups.

Second, the very expensive, high-stakes nature of the state adoption process has accelerated the consolidation of the textbook industry. A generation ago, there were numerous American textbook publishing companies. In recent years, small publishers have gone bankrupt or merged with megacorporations, leaving only four or five big publishing houses dominating a \$4 billion industry. When one corporation owns half a dozen different publishing companies, it doesn't have much incentive to keep several different textbooks in print, competing with one another. In effect, the textbook adoption process—whereby the state buys texts for all schools in certain grades—has diminished competition.

I would go further and say that the loss of competition among textbook publishers has also resulted in a loss of quality. Teachers say the same thing. I hear it from them frequently. The books are huge, stuffed with glitzy graphics, dazzling to look at, but dull, dull, dull. The history books are comprehensive, but dull, dull, dull. They are written by committee, edited by committee, choppy, superficial, and careful to offend no one. Let me say again that I don't blame the publishers. They are operating in the only marketplace that they know. Of course they prefer to make a sale to the state of Texas or California rather than selling to millions of teachers. It is easier for them, and it allows them to say that they are just complying with the states' standards by removing certain words, phrases, topics, and images. Frankly, I wish the publishers would defend the First Amendment by calling attention to any restriction on their freedom to publish. It is not good enough, I think, to defend the restrictions by saying that they are just responding to the wishes of the marketplace.

I do blame the states, however. They should abolish the textbook adoption process. They should not choose the textbooks that the state will pay for. To me, this is akin to saying that the government will give away free tickets to certain movies, and anyone who wants to see something different must pay for it themselves.

Instead they should abolish the state textbook adoption process and allocate the state's resources for educational materials on a per-pupil basis. Schools and teachers should use that money to buy the books or software or whatever they think works best for them. The states set the standards, but they should leave the schools and teachers free to meet them as they think best.

On the subject of state standards, I respectfully commend to the committee's attention a brand-new study of state U.S. history standards, off the presses today, written by Dr. Sheldon Stern, who served for many years as the historian of the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. Dr. Stern evaluated the standards of the 48 states that have them, plus the District of Columbia, on their handling of U.S. history—the first time this has ever been done by a historian. He found that six states—Indiana, New York, Alabama, Arizona, California and Massachusetts—have established outstanding academic standards for U.S. history, but that eight have weak standards in this key subject; fully 23 states have U.S. history standards that Dr. Stern terms "ineffective". Considering the

central role that statewide academic standards play in determining what our teachers teach and what our children learn, this bleak picture deserves your attention. Dr. Stern's study was prepared under the aegis of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, of which I am a trustee.

Later this year the Fordham Institute will release a new study under my direction, which evaluates textbooks in U.S. history and world history. A dozen prominent historians cooperated in preparing this study.

I testified earlier this year on behalf of the legislation prepared by Senator Lamar Alexander to sponsor teacher training academies in history and other valuable activities. Anything that the federal and state governments, as well as universities and industry, can do to improve the knowledge of our teachers is a welcome improvement.

Education is a complicated, multi-faceted activity. It has many moving parts. We certainly need well-prepared teachers. We also need excellent textbooks, tests, and standards. As I tried to show in my book, "The Language Police," and as Dr. Sheldon Stern shows in his review of state history standards, we do not have them now.

Thank you for your attention.