

**STATEMENT IN OPPOSITION TO BOOK CENSORSHIP
IN THE TUCSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
January 30, 2012**

The undersigned organizations are committed to protecting free speech and intellectual freedom. We write to express our deep concern about the removal of books used in the Mexican-American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District. This occurred in response to a determination by Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal that the program “contained content promoting resentment toward a race or class of people” and that “materials repeatedly reference white people as being ‘oppressors...’ in violation of state law.” The books have been boxed up and put in storage; their fate and that of the program remain in limbo.

The First Amendment is grounded on the fundamental rule that government officials, including public school administrators, may not suppress “an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.” School officials have a great deal of authority and discretion to determine the curriculum, the subject of courses, and even methods of instruction. They are restrained only by the constitutional obligation to base their decisions on sound educational grounds, and not on ideology or political or other personal beliefs. Thus, school officials are free to debate the merits of any educational program, but that debate does not justify the wholesale removal of books, especially when the avowed purpose is to suppress unwelcome information and viewpoints.

School officials have insisted that the books haven’t been banned because they are still available in school libraries. It is irrelevant that the books are available in the library – or at the local bookstore. School officials have removed materials from the curriculum, effectively banning them from certain classes, solely because of their content and the messages they contain. The effort to “prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, [or] religion” is the essence of censorship, whether the impact results in removal of all the books in a classroom, seven books, or only one.

Students deserve an education that provides exposure to a wide range of topics and perspectives, including those that are controversial. Their education has already suffered from this political and ideological donnybrook, which has caused massive disruption in their classes and will wreak more havoc as teachers struggle to fill the educational vacuum that has been created.

Book-banning and thought control are antithetical to American law, tradition and values. In Justice Louis Brandeis's famous words, the First Amendment is founded on the belief:

that freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth; that, without free speech and assembly, discussion would be futile; ... that it is hazardous to discourage thought, hope and imagination Believing in the power of reason as applied through public discussion, [the Framers] eschewed silence coerced by law Recognizing the occasional tyrannies of governing majorities, they amended the Constitution so that free speech and assembly should be guaranteed.

The First Amendment right to read, speak and think freely applies to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, religion, or national origin. We strongly urge Arizona school officials to take this commitment seriously and to return all books to classrooms and remove all restrictions on ideas that can be addressed in class.

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