

Academic Freedom as Seen by the 1970s Special Issue Editor

Todd Clark

Academic freedom disputes usually arise from ordinary school activities—a reading assignment, a school newspaper article, a controversial discussion. Sometimes these disputes are unexpected, sometimes predictable. They occur because we live in an open society, often in communities where some parents don't want their schools to reflect that openness. Two recent events illustrate the point.

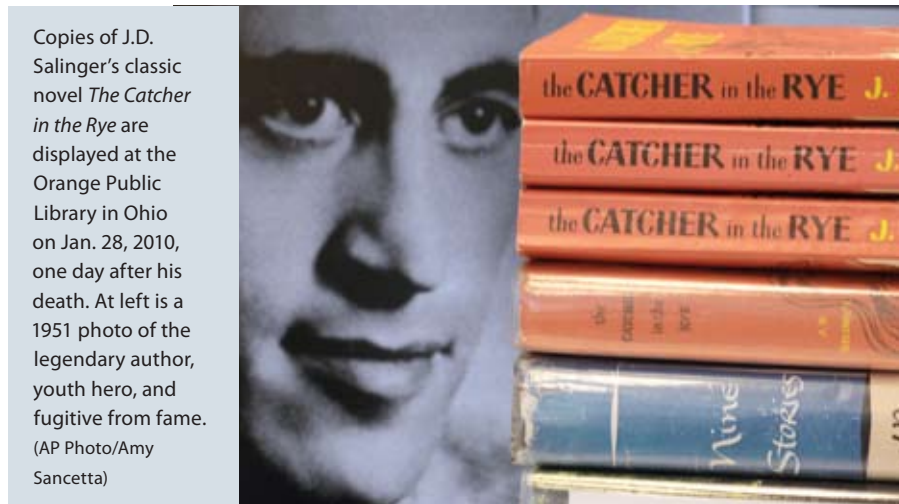
on materials and teachers who challenge the values of their community. We urged teachers to review the NCSS academic freedom guidelines, and to be sure that their school districts had procedures in place to deal fairly and judiciously with community complaints if they arise.

We suggested that students needed to learn why academic freedom was important in helping maintain a free and open society. We provided cases to be studied that provided background and understanding of the concept so important to democratic values. I believe that remains important advice for our profession.

Over the years, our colleagues have done great work in this field. Carolyn Pereira of the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago and her *Deliberating in a Democracy* program, and Diana Hess of the University of Wisconsin, through her work dealing with controversy, have provided teachers with powerful ways to introduce young people to the vitality and importance of controversy to our society.

There is no shortage of materials. All that is needed is for our colleagues in the classroom to spread the word through their teaching that an open society will only remain open if the public supports it, and, that such support grows from understanding.

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Copies of J.D. Salinger's classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye* are displayed at the Orange Public Library in Ohio on Jan. 28, 2010, one day after his death. At left is a 1951 photo of the legendary author, youth hero, and fugitive from fame. (AP Photo/Amy Sancetta)

A few months ago, parents in an elementary district in Riverside County, California, demanded the removal of the Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary from the school their child attended because the phrase "oral sex" was contained in the dictionary, along with a definition. The school immediately complied with the parent's wishes. The school district quickly investigated the problem, and after consideration, decided the best way to deal with the problem was to provide parents with a choice, the standard dictionary used by most Americans, or another un-named option.

More than 60 years ago, J.D. Salinger, who died recently at the age of 91, wrote

one of the most frequently banned books in the history of American education. His main character, Holden Caulfield, began shocking parents by using the "F" word long before most of us were born. Every year, new parents are shocked, and demand the removal from their children's book bags of this story of an adolescent struggling to understand his life.

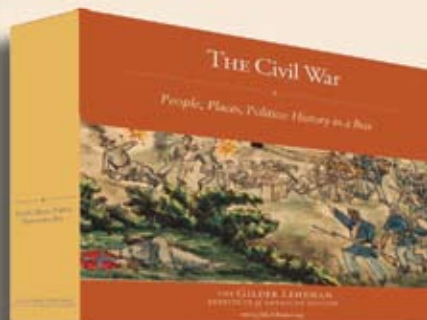
In the 1970s, with *Catcher in the Rye* already at the top of the banned book list, several colleagues and I prepared a special issue of *Social Education* on academic freedom. We maintained that we should provide as much free access to information in our schools as is consistent with the age of our students, and that we should never be surprised by attacks

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