

# PLG Statement on Censorship and the Tucson Unified School District

Recent media reports regarding the mass removal of books from classrooms in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) demand a response from librarians, charged by our professional ethics to oppose censorship and restriction on information.

After reviewing publicly available materials documenting the process leading up to this TUSD action, the Progressive Librarians Guild believes a challenge should be issued regarding not only the onerous situation, but the politics underlying the decision to cut District's Mexican American Studies program (MAS) program.

At issue is the supposed violation by TUSD of Arizona state law prohibiting classes in public or charter schools from instructions that:

1. Promote the overthrow of the United States Government
2. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people
3. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
4. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.

A.R.S. §15-112

The books in question include the following titles used in conjunction with courses taught throughout the TUSD as part of the District's MAS program:

*Critical Race Theory* by Richard Delgado  
*500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures* edited by Elizabeth Martinez  
*Message to AZTLAN* by Rodolfo Corky Gonzales  
*Chicano! The History of the Mexican Civil Rights Movement*  
by Arturo Rosales  
*Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* by Rodolfo Acuna  
*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire  
*Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* by Bill Bigelow

On December 27, 2011, Lewis D. Kowal, Administrative Law Judge, ruled in favor of Arizona's Department of Education Superintendent's allegation that MAS courses violated the law, and on January 10, 2012, the Board of TUSD passed a resolution requiring the immediate suspension of MAS classes. Had TUSD not suspended the program state funds would have been withdrawn from the District.

The Board's resolution did not address the removal of books from classrooms, yet TUSD officials removed and stored books even while one class was in session. News of this mass removal of books from schools traveled, and TUSD found itself confronted with accusations that it had "banned books" from the schools.

On January 17, 2012, the District issued a statement saying, "Tucson Unified School District has not banned any books as has been widely and incorrectly reported." The press release described the removal as simply a move of the books to storage and further noted that all of the titles removed from classrooms were available to students through TUSD school libraries. A check of the online catalog verified that at least one copy of each title is, indeed, available.

The fact that these titles are available through the school libraries has minimal bearing, however, on the extreme and censorious behavior of school officials in at least three respects:

1. Neither A.R.S. §15-112 nor the TUSD Board resolution requires the removal of books in order to set the District into compliance with the law.
2. The act of removing books from a classroom during a class session clearly has a chilling effect on students and the entire educational community. Further, removal of materials from classrooms impinges on teacher freedom of speech.
3. TUSD can quibble over whether or not it banned any books, but it certainly cannot state that it did not ban all the courses being taught through the MAS program. Compliance with the order to suspend the program is in itself an act of censorship and a violation of academic freedom.

Regarding the political aspects of this situation, A.R.S. §15-112 was signed into law in the spring of 2010 on the heels of the state's anti-immigration law, considered by many to be racist and neocolonial. The law is currently being reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court. PLG considers A.R.S. §15-112 to have arisen from a climate of racist sentiment among lawmakers in the State of Arizona. This sentiment has been promoted by Judge Kowal in his siding with Department of Education expert witnesses against TUSD and MAS, which placed TUSD "between a rock and a hard place" – either suspend MAS or lose state funding for the entire school district. Given the budgetary problems facing school districts across the nation, TUSD's decision to sacrifice MAS over funding is understandable, but unacceptable.

TUSD is aware its MAS program did not teach "racial resentment" but historical literacy. It is also aware there is absolutely nothing in the MAS curriculum that affronts civic values or clashes with classes that teach "ethnic solidarity." In the face of absurd, draconian laws, the only ethical position to take is one of complete opposition. Today's capitulation to

A.R.S. §15-112 will be tomorrow's capitulation to the next absurd, racist law enacted by the Arizona legislature. The law should be abolished.

The Progressive Librarians Guild opposes the actions of all officials in the State of Arizona responsible for the passage, enforcement, and/or compliance with A.R.S. §15-112.

Progressive Librarians Guild  
Coordinating Committee (PLG-CC)  
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