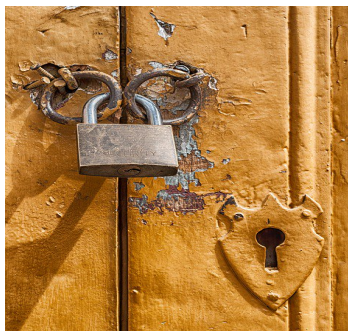


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Loss of Freedom of Thought and Expression Threatens Schools

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on December 21, 2017 6:25 AM | [No comments](#)

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John Dewey asserted that education and democracy were intimately connected. We were raised into the profession on that premise. Recently, most educators have been focused on career and college preparation and that has risen to make it seem like the purpose of public education. Today we are wary that our purpose can drift from a philosophy upon which the country was founded to a practicality for its economic future. One must drive the other but which sits in the driver's seat matters. Developing an educated citizenry has been the reason for public education. We believe in all three: education and democracy are intimately connected, education today has a responsibility to prepare students for college and careers and also to be educated citizens.

In order to accomplish this, educators all, leaders and teachers, must come together with this common understanding as the foundation of their work. Here, we have a warning. What evidence causes this concern for us? The reversal of net neutrality ([NY Times](#)) and a gag order issued to the CDC ([Washington Post](#)) preventing them from using 7 words are two important actions that can begin a cascade of limits unless we, as educators and citizens, pay attention and do something.

Limiting Language is Limiting Freedom

Tenure was fought for and won as protection. Granted other professionals don't have it. So, why do we? Teachers and leaders are given tenure to protect them from the political winds of local governance and federal governments also. A change in a board majority or a leader shouldn't put an educator's livelihood at risk unless competence is an issue. Remember before tenure, female teachers could be fired for being pregnant. Tenure guarantees there is a legitimate cause for termination. Then, there is academic freedom. Educators believe(d) that we should explore ideas and open doors and imagination, discern among competing positions to determine facts and blow away chaff. We resist being controlled or limited in how we teach the sides of an argument, perspective, and invite and manage the developing thoughts and expressions of young people. Educators use that freedom to engage young minds in the action of learning.

Tenure remains a topic that provokes differing opinions, but for the purpose of this argument, we refer to it only as a protection of professional voice. Educators have fought hard against banning books and language and thought. We cannot imagine what scientists are feeling like when their research is discarded and deleted and the words they can use are defined by non-professional politicians.

Schools must remain a bastion of freedom of thought and of ideas now more than ever with the push to develop better problem solvers, designers, and innovators. Be warned, however, that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were instructed they are no longer permitted to use 7 words in their budget proposals. Yes. A governmental agency has been instructed there are forbidden words, 7 of them according to a [Washington Post](#) article.

Policy analysts at the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in Atlanta were told of the list of forbidden terms at a meeting Thursday with senior CDC officials who oversee the budget, according to an analyst who took part in the 90-minute briefing. The forbidden terms are "vulnerable," "entitlement," "diversity," "transgender," "fetus," "evidence-based" and "science-based." ([Washington Post](#))

This is a dangerous step. With so many balls in the air, it is possible that Congress will not note, or take action, but we must. Limiting the language government departments can use can be a first step in limiting language and thought in all domains. Educators work day-to-day in classrooms, schools, and districts, under the policies of the boards of education and regulations of state and national agencies. It may be easy to see new intrusions in another field as similar to one of those. But, we see it as very new and troubling. Certainly, we have endured through changes of direction and policies over and over. But, we are a profession, as is science by the way, that thrives on the dialogue and the tension between differing points of view to move knowledge forward. We think history informs and offers wisdom in that progress. To prohibit the use

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/leadership_360/2017/12/loss_of_freedom_of_thought_and_expression_threatens_schools.html?cmp=eml-enl-eu-new... 1/2

between differing points of view to move knowledge forward. We think history informs and offers wisdom in that progress. To prohibit the use of words such as evidence and science undermines our work.

Limiting Access to Information is Limiting Freedom of Thought

We have recently written about the dangers of the loss of net neutrality. We published as a warning. Since we wrote that blog, the FCC has eliminated it. Over the past years, as we developed the use of technology in schools, in addition to using it for communication and sharing, its use as a source of information has been embraced. As an information source its value was in these three facets.

- The architecture as open ended, decentralized, and multidirectional
- Communication protocols as open, distributed, and susceptible to modification
- Governance as open and cooperative and embedded.

All that is threatened now. The loss of net neutrality brings with it a reality that the people/schools/businesses with the most money might have the most balanced, open, decentralized access to open, and distributed information. Someone else will make decision for them and information access will come with a cost and a bias.

... broadband providers will begin selling the internet in bundles, not unlike how cable television is sold today. Want to access Facebook and Twitter? Under a bundling system, getting on those sites could require paying for a premium social media package. ([NY Times](#))

Consider the Power of Educators Taking Action Now

Educators focus on our own field but we are, always, a part of something bigger. We do not remain insulated from other changes taking place in our country. For those who prefer to, at least, it is important to monitor those things that can find their way into schools. Limiting speech and access to information is the antithesis of our purpose in a free and open democracy. This isn't only a dynamic time for teachers of history with new topics that are both current and essential. All teachers and their leaders must awaken to the boulder on the top of the mountain that has started rolling toward us. As a nation-wide system we have a loud voice. It should be used. The freedoms we have enjoyed on the shoulders of those who came before us are being threatened. It is our turn to fight for them. If we don't, what are we leaving for the next generation of students and teachers? It is our turn to protect the freedoms that make American education such a dynamic opportunity for young people. It is our turn.

Ann Myers and Jill Berkowicz are the authors of [The STEM Shift \(2015, Corwin\)](#) a book about leading the shift into 21st century schools. Ann and Jill welcome connecting through [Twitter](#) & [Email](#).

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