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Learning Not to Curse in Arizona

Dennis Baron · Thursday, March 15th, 2012

 The Arizona State Senate is considering a proposal to fire teachers who swear. [SB 1467](#) bans their use of any words that would violate FCC regulations against obscenity, indecency, and profanity on broadcast radio and television. A teacher would be suspended without pay after the first offence, fired after the third. Employers would also have the option of dismissing an instructor at the first curse.

Legislating what we can and cannot say has become an Arizona specialty, and ordering G-rated language in the schools fits right in with the state's long history of micromanaging free speech. In 1988 Arizona passed the nation's most stringent official language law, requiring all public employees from the governor to the dogcatcher to speak English and only English on the job. The law was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the Arizona Supreme Court. Arizona's Superintendent of Public Instruction recently sent [monitors into the schools](#) to root out teachers with strong accents and poor grammar, a practice the state reluctantly abandoned when the U.S. Department of Education suggested it might be discriminatory. Arizona's latest official language law, passed in 2006, requires public employees to use English in all of their official duties, and the Yuma County court recently threw a [city council candidate](#) off the ballot in tiny San Luis (pop. 25,505) because her English wasn't good enough, a decision that was affirmed by the Arizona Supreme Court.

Now a group of Arizona legislators, not satisfied with the state's tough English-only stance, want to narrow the law to require not just English, but carefully-sanitized English, at least so far as teachers are concerned. The bill applies to anyone in the state who gives instruction at any level from preschool to university, and it's framed broadly enough to include anything a teacher says that's X-rated, both in the classroom and out of school as well.

If the bill passes, teachers could be canned for a single unscripted f-bomb, even one uttered in response to hammer hitting thumb in a teacher's home workshop. And it would become impossible to teach the many literary classics that incorporate dirty words—everything from Chaucer and Shakespeare to James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence. Banned as well would be descriptions by medical school professors of human anatomy, sexuality, or excretion. And there would be no law school discussions of such Supreme Court cases as [Cohen v. California](#) (1971), which deals explicitly with an obscenity-decorated jacket used to protest the draft, or of [Pacifica v. FCC](#) (1978), the case involving George Carlin's "7 dirty words you can't say on the air" which affirmed the very ban that the Arizona legislators want to extend to teachers, although the justices didn't shy away from using FCC-banned words in issuing their opinion in the case. And it would put the kibosh on any academic mention of [FCC v. FOX](#), a case currently before the high court, which has the justices wondering whether the naked statuary on the frieze above their courtroom would pass strict scrutiny by the FCC. Certainly there could be no such displays of gross anatomy in any

Arizona art museum, particularly one affiliated with a public university in the state.



The Los Angeles Times announces the Supreme Court decision in *Pacifica v. FCC*, 1978. The court upheld the FCC ban on bad language during prime time, but it did not shy away from citing the bad language in its opinion. The FCC ban covers only over-the-air broadcasts on radio and TV, not cable or satellite stations.

Perhaps the senators sponsoring the Arizona bill think all that would be just fine. In their view, cleaning up the language of the teachers is the first step toward cleaning up the language of the students. But such linguistic cleansing is doomed to fail. As everyone knows who had to put a nickel in the coffee can every time they said a bad word at home, once in a while everybody needs to say something blunt that just isn't covered by the available euphemisms. As Caliban, a character in Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, complains, "You taught me language; and my profit on't is, I know how to curse." Whether it's used for insult, emotional release, or rhetorical emphasis, obscenity seems an essential part of language, and research even suggests that cursing could be good for business, and it may be good for your health as well.

Banning dirty words is also illegal. Writing for the Court's majority in *Cohen v. California*, Justice John Marshall Harlan says of California's attempt to ban the f-word: "Surely the State has no right to cleanse public debate to the point where it is grammatically palatable to the most squeamish among us." Harlan adds that obscenity is in the eye of the beholder: "One man's vulgarity is another's lyric." And he warns, "Governments might soon seize upon the censorship of particular words as a convenient guise for banning the expression of unpopular views."

But besides telling people what language to use and how to use it, banning unpopular views is something else the Arizona legislature seems good at. Before it tried to clean up school language, Arizona set about cleaning up the curriculum. In 2010, the state banned ethnic studies programs in the schools and ordered that students "not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people."

Arizona's clean-speech-for-teachers act is not likely to survive a constitutional test if it is enacted. But even without the statute, the state's teachers still won't be able to explore with their students the implications of Caliban's provocative claim about language and cursing. Though Caliban doesn't use any of George Carlin's seven dirty words, the Caribbean native does promote resentment toward his European colonial masters, and so *The Tempest* has earned a place on the state's [do-not-teach list](#). Teachers who swear could lose their jobs, but those who teach banned books like *The Tempest* risk losing state funding for their entire district. The lesson of the Arizona legislature is clear: teach the right books, in the right version of the right language, or we'll fire your ass and shut you down. And by the way, if you're a teacher, you can't say "fire your ass." In Arizona, education is all about learning not to curse.

In other news, in 2011 the Arizona legislature passed a law permitting concealed weapons to be carried in Arizona schools and colleges. Fortunately, that measure was [vetoed by the governor](#) before any teachers got shot for swearing or for teaching Shakespeare.

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