



A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**

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February 19, 2018

Dr. Allison Pilley, Director of Learning Support
Springfield Public Schools
1359 E Saint Louis St
Springfield, MO 65802

Dear Dr. Pilley and Springfield Public School Review Committee:

We are a group of literary and educational advocacy organizations dedicated to promoting the First Amendment and students' freedom to read. We were disturbed to learn from media reports that, in response to parental objections and in direct violation of Policy KLB, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas was removed from classrooms, pending review. We are also concerned by the practice of red-flagging "controversial" materials.

We urge you to return *The Hate U Give* to classrooms while you review its suitability for instruction. In reaching your decision, we hope you will take into account the legal and educational considerations we raise below. We also hope you reconsider the practice of selectively informing parents about the books taught in the curriculum.

We understand that *The Hate U Give* was assigned as a supplemental text to Reed Academy eighth-graders until a parent requested it removed due to explicit language. After learning of the assignment, Missouri State Representative Anderson also contacted school officials to request the book's removal, citing the same concerns. Consequently, the book was pulled from the classroom, pending further review of its educational merits.

We have the following concerns: First, the premature removal of the book from the classroom pending review violates your own policy and raises First Amendment concerns. Second, while we support informing parents about what their children are reading, the flagging of "controversial" materials misleadingly presents those materials as somehow dangerous and is likely to invite unnecessary challenges from parents, thus interfering with the educational process. Finally, removing *The Hate U Give* deprives students of the opportunity to safely explore the challenging themes addressed in the book and diminishes their exposure to underrepresented voices that enhance their education.

1. **Removing a book from the curriculum in response to parental pressures and without academic review not only violates Springfield District Policy KLB, it raises serious First Amendment concerns.**

Springfield District policies on instructional materials clearly state “in no instance will a book or other instructional material actively under reconsideration be removed from circulation, except by appropriate action by the Board, until the procedures outlined (in the policy) have been followed.” Policy KLB outlines a process whereby “a committee composed of the principal, the librarian and two teachers...will review the book or material and make a recommendation to the superintendent or designee.” Yet, in this instance, *The Hate U Give* was removed before a committee review could be performed.

The Supreme Court has affirmed that school officials have broad discretion to direct the use of curricular texts but has cautioned that such discretion be exercised within the parameters of the First Amendment. **School officials risk violating students’ First Amendment rights when they impose restrictions that discriminate on the basis of viewpoint and are not “reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.”** *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260, 261 (1988). Were school administrators to remove a book from the curriculum solely because some parents claimed it contradicted their religious, political or moral beliefs, they would be impermissibly allowing the viewpoint of these parents to dominate the public education process.

2. **Requiring permission slips for the teaching of “controversial” materials impermissibly invites viewpoint discrimination and burdens teachers.**

We understand that Springfield District requires parental permission for students to opt-in to reading books deemed to be “controversial.” Students without signed permission slips are offered alternative assignments.

While informing parents about the reading materials their children are discussing in class is a good idea, permission slip policies that flag only some books as “controversial” invite challenges and undermine educational objectives. A policy that requires that material be flagged based on ambiguous and subjective terms is likely to provoke challenges that disregard the literary value of the works as a whole or the educational reasons for their selection. Teachers, who already strive to convey complex themes and understandings in limited class time, would struggle under the added weight of varied lesson plans and may avoid assigning books that are otherwise highly valuable altogether.

Rather than requiring permission slips, **consider sharing a list of all instructional materials at a pre-term open house, where teachers can objectively explain to parents the educational merits of each selection and how it will enrich their child’s learning experience at Springfield Public Schools.** For informed parents who insist on opting out, we recommend providing a limited list of comparable materials, to avoid overburdening and weakening the entire classroom experience.

We would be happy to help you in drafting a careful policy; please feel free to reach out to us at anytime.

- 3. A pedagogically sound approach to curricular selection requires educational professionals to ask whether a book has educational value, not whether it is comfortable.**

The Hate U Give is a critically acclaimed novel and widely recommended for young readers. It tells the story of Starr Carter, a 16-year old black student who – like far too many teens in America – witnesses the traumatic shooting of her unarmed best friend by a white police officer and courageously advocates for justice, discovering her own agency in the process. Author Angie Thomas has been widely praised for her deft writing on the deeply entrenched racial prejudice and police brutality that continue to plague American society, “forcing you to remember not only the victim who died but the victim who lived” ([Slate](#), April 2017). *Kirkus Reviews* magazine and *Publishers Weekly* regard this [National Book Award Finalist](#) and Boston Globe-Horn Book Award winner as “[necessary, important](#)” and “[heartbreakingly topical](#).”

Books provide a safe space for students to explore difficult issues and ideas as they grow into a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them. For young readers in Springfield, especially those who seek to better understand the many layers of the country where they live, *The Hate U Give* offers both insight and inspiration. Indeed, young people in Missouri confront racial injustice and incidents of police brutality in their own communities, as evinced by the swell of protests and public discourse following the fatal shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson. How many of Mike Brown’s friends – how many teenagers in Springfield – can identify with Starr Carter?

While not every student may feel prepared to engage such questions, no single parent may deprive all Reed Academy students of the opportunity to do so. Rather than deprive students the opportunity to engage with *The Hate U Give* based on one opinion, we urge you to return the novel to the curriculum while the committee conducts its review. We also ask that the committee focus on the educational value of this book and the story it tells when making its determination.

Ultimately, we urge that your decision on whether to retain *The Hate U Give* in Reed Academy classrooms be guided by your commitment to the First Amendment rights of your students to quality education, free from viewpoint discrimination.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further guidance and support.

Sincerely,



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