

November 2, 2020

By electronic mail

Board of Education
Cicero Public School District 99
5110 24th St,
Cicero, IL 60804

Re: Removal of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* from the curriculum

Dear Board members:

As organizations dedicated to protecting the freedom to read, the First Amendment, and high quality public education, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the other groups signed below are deeply concerned by the response of Cicero Public School District 99 to a recent challenge to the inclusion of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the curriculum of a 7th grade reading class.

As we understand the facts, the book is on an approved District reading list. Nevertheless, when a parent discovered that the book was being taught in a 7th grade reading class and complained to the District, Denise Thul, Coordinator of Reading and Language Arts, issued a memorandum to all District teachers, instructing them to cease teaching the book until the appropriateness of the book can be reviewed.

Curriculum decisions, particularly decisions surrounding challenged works, require a balancing of the interests of a variety of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, librarians, and students. These are very difficult decisions which can spark strong emotions on all sides, and are seen as legitimate by all parties when the procedures for adjudicating challenges are set forth clearly in district regulations.

The District's current de facto policy, which is to immediately remove every book that is challenged until the challenge can be resolved, unduly disrupts the educational process and presents serious First Amendment concerns. Most districts employ challenge procedures which include most or all of the following elements:

- An attempt should be made to resolve the complainant's concerns informally.
- If a formal challenge is filed, the challenged work should remain in use until the challenge is resolved.
- A committee which is composed of diverse stakeholders should review the challenged work and make recommendations to the superintendent.

- The challenged work should be assessed according to specific, objective, and relevant criteria.

We urge the district to formally establish these types of procedures, and also to employ those procedures when adjudicating the current challenge to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. We have attached recommended guidelines for adjudicating challenges, as well as a sample policy.

Removing any book on the basis of a few subjective complaints not only undermines educational goals but also stifles free expression in the school community. Almost eighty years ago, the Supreme Court noted that “no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.” *West Virginia Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette*, 319 US 624, 642 (1943). That remains true to this day, even when the official in question is acting for members of the community.

Of course, the District allows each parent to request an alternative assignment if they don’t want their child to read a particular book. But no parent has the right to decide what books other children may read.

As a practical matter, removing books in response to a few complaints may set a harmful precedent and encourage future complaints. Moreover, it can also lead to self-censorship by teachers and librarians who may select books devoid of thought-provoking content in order to avoid challenges.

Current district policy urges administrators to “recognize the expertise of the professional staff” in making decisions about the curriculum. We hope that they will do so in this case by returning *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to the classroom.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. If we can be of assistance in regard to drafting regulations governing book challenges, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely yours,



Christopher Finan
Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

Co-signed by: American Booksellers for Free Expression
Authors Guild
National Council of Teachers of English
PEN America Children’s and Young Adult Book Committee
Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators

Cc: Thomas M. Tomschin, President
Larry Polk, Vice President
James E. Terracino, Secretary
Alice Couch, Member
Derek Dominick, Member
Jorge M. Rueda, Member
Graciela Segura , Member
Rodolfo Hernandez, Superintendent

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