

January 18, 2019

To William Gronseth, Jeff Horton, Gail Netland, and members of the School Board:

The purpose of this letter is to make a formal complaint regarding the administration's process in removing *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from curriculum and selecting new novels for grades 9 and 11. Since the decision was announced on Feb 2, 2018, district English teachers have asked administrators on several occasions to reverse this decision, hoping they would consider teacher experience and expertise, but they repeatedly refused. We also offered several compromises, asked to slow down the process and allow for time to pilot texts, and asked to do a total revamp of scaffolding for 6-12 novels and reading selections which hasn't happened for over twenty years.

Teachers' goals throughout this process have been to uphold the integrity of district curriculum and serve the best interests of students according to what we observe in our classrooms. We want our students to read the best quality literature we can present to them, including multicultural literature from authors of diverse perspectives, and we want them to enjoy the reading, especially as getting students to read an entire novel has become increasingly challenging.

Dr. Michael Cary claimed he received five or six parent complaints during his years as curriculum director, and Tonya Sconiers claimed to hear complaints from students. While we share administrators' concerns about students feeling marginalized, we find many problems with the way administrators have responded to these complaints:

1. Administrators failed to communicate to complaining students that they had options, such as reading an alternative novel. They also failed to explain that both books promote an anti-racist message.
2. Administrators failed to communicate with complaining parents that they had the option of filing a formal complaint (Policy 6040).
3. Administrators failed to communicate parents' concerns about the novels to educators, so teachers never had the opportunity to respond or make changes in how they approach the content in their classrooms.
4. During inservices held in recent years, administrators told teachers that the novels were controversial, never that they were considering removing them. The decision to remove them was a shock for teachers.
5. Administrators removed the novels without any teacher input. They failed to ask teachers how they teach the novels and how students receive them.

6. Administrators seemed either unaware or unconcerned about the potential for controversy, even after the Biloxi Mississippi school district made national headlines when it removed *To Kill a Mockingbird* from its curriculum in October of 2017.
7. Administrators persisted in their decision despite immediate local and national criticism from students, parents, teachers, community members, and organizations such as the Arrowhead Reading Council and the National Coalition Against Censorship.
8. Administrators ignored hundreds of students' letters and survey responses protesting the decision.
9. During the February 14 meeting to air concerns, English teachers were lectured, interrupted, misunderstood, and dismissed.
10. In August, six teachers met with Bill Gronseth to present a compromise that addressed teacher, administrator, parent, and student concerns. Despite meeting with teachers for an hour and receiving a paper copy of the compromise, he failed to respond after telling teachers he would think about the compromise, which consisted of three main points that would have created a "win-win" situation for both administration and teachers, though both would have to forego something:
 - a. Keep *Mockingbird* and remove *Huck Finn*, which uses the n-word over 200 times.
 - b. Train teachers to be more effective and sensitive when presenting controversial content in *Mockingbird* and across the curriculum.
 - c. Continue plans to adopt two new novels to add diverse voices to the curriculum and include community involvement in the process.
11. Despite Dr. Cary's timeline to have a novel chosen before the summer, administrators did not move forward with novel selection and unit planning over the summer. The 2018-19 school year began with no novels in place.
12. After the 2018-19 school year began, teachers asked repeatedly for an extension in order to have time to select the best novel and do quality curriculum writing work. Teachers are busy with planning, grading, writing recommendations, and supervising extracurricular activities. Though it's unreasonable to expect teachers to read multiple novels and write a quality unit during the school year, administrators denied this request.
13. On January 10, 2019, several English teachers met with Gail Netland to discuss the three books that had been selected to read and evaluate. All present agreed that all three books had both merits and drawbacks but that none of the three texts would be engaging for the majority of our students. The community feedback presented at the meeting echoed many of our comments; in fact, one response said, "None of these texts teach the social history that *To Kill a Mockingbird* does, and if that is lost from the curriculum, it will be a true loss."
14. Despite the lack of an engaging book with literary merit, the decision was pushed forward by Ms. Netland due to time constraints. We believe this is a colossal waste of curriculum monies, and this forced book will continue to be a blight on our 9th grade curriculum for decades.

The impact of this decision and the process behind it is significant. English teachers are angry and demoralized. The district is about to spend a lot of money to implement a book that is not engaging and simply makes a lateral move from discussing the historical oppression of African Americans to that of Native Americans, while lacking an engaging storyline.

Most importantly, students will be adversely affected. Instead of reading the Pulitzer Prize-winning best-loved novel in the country written by the recipient of two presidential medals, they will be required to read something that everyone present on January 10 agreed would not engage them.

We are professionals. We will continue to stand before our students and present assigned material to the best of our capabilities. However, we are unified in the belief that this decision will short-change the education of our students for years to come. Therefore, we do not endorse this decision.

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(There was no clear process followed,
hopeful for a systemic repair)

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