

A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**
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April 12, 2016

Mr. Adam Phelps
President, Northville Public Schools Board of Education
Northville Public Schools
501 W. Main Street
Northville, MI 48167
c/o Meghan Irving, Board Secretary: irvingme@northvilleschools.org

Dear Mr. Phelps and Members of the Northville Public Schools Board of Education,

As organizations concerned with the freedom to read, the integrity of the public education system, and the application of First Amendment law and principles in public institutions, we are writing to urge you to accept the review committee's recommendation to keep Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* in Northville High School's AP English Literature and Composition course.

According to published reports, a level-three review committee was called into action after parents raised complaints about the book's content, including sexual references that some have called "porn." After reading *The Bluest Eye* in its entirety and weighing its pedagogical value, the committee – comprised of a Northville High School administrator, the district media specialist, an elementary teacher, a parent, two English teachers, and the district's director of instruction – recommended continued use of the text, but also recommended that students who wish to opt out be provided alternate texts. We understand that the book has been taught in the AP course since the early 1990s.

The complainants' focus on the sexual content of *The Bluest Eye* overlooks the content of the book as a whole. The novel is primarily concerned not with sexuality but with the problems ensuing from differences in social class and race – an especially appropriate theme in the high school classroom. *The Bluest Eye* is widely recognized as a work of significant literary and artistic merit, and its author is a Nobel Literature Laureate, as well as a Pulitzer Prize winner. Toni Morrison's work has been called part of the "canon" of American literature. *The Bluest Eye* is widely taught in high schools and colleges around the country and is recommended by the College Board because of Morrison's superior narrative style. Indeed, the school district would potentially put its students at an educational disadvantage in college if it did not introduce them to an author of Morrison's stature, style, and importance in its AP-level English course.

Furthermore, removing a book because some object to or disapprove of it would raise serious constitutional questions. The First Amendment "protects the citizen against the State itself and all of its creatures—Boards of Education not excepted." *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943). As a result, school officials are bound by a constitutional duty not to suppress unpopular, controversial, or even "objectionable" ideas. It is a fundamental First Amendment principle that local school boards may not remove books simply because they dislike the ideas contained in these books." *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* (1982). Thus, decisions about instructional

materials must be based on sound educational grounds. Objections to the message, ideas, or content do not provide an adequate basis for the removal of any book.

Two of the basic goals of the public education system are to endow students with the knowledge widely shared by their peers across the country, and to introduce them to the range of ideas that they will encounter in college and in life. Indeed, Northville Public School District's vision is to "[build] a culture of student empowerment, along with enduring leadership principles that will ensure students are college- and career-ready in the 21st century world." A district can only do so by fostering thoughtful conversation, not stifling it through removal of renowned literature like *The Bluest Eye* from the classroom.

We therefore urge you to base your decision on sound educational and constitutional principles, and vote to keep *The Bluest Eye* in Northville High School's AP English Literature and Composition classes.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

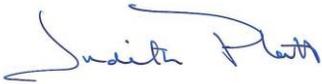
Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



Chris Finan, Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Judy Platt, Director
Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



Millie Davis, Director
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National Council of Teachers of English



James LaRue, Director
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