

**N** Kids'  
**C** Right  
**A** to Read  
**C** Project

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

**CO-SPONSORED BY**  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
Association of American Publishers

Superintendent Cliff Thompson  
Sauk Prairie School District  
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Prairie du Sac, WI 53578

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**May 17, 2017**

Dear Superintendent Thompson,

As a coalition of organizations devoted to protecting the right of students to read and access information, we write to urge you to uphold the decision of the review committee to keep *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (henceforth, *Part-Time Indian*) by Sherman Alexie in the ninth-grade curriculum. Removal of this book based on a few individuals' complaints would undermine educational goals and raise serious First Amendment concerns.

It is our understanding that a member of the community filed a formal complaint against *Part-Time Indian*, citing its use of profanity and sexual innuendo as well as its depictions of violence. Pursuant to Policy 9130, a review committee consisting of teachers and community members was formed to assess whether the novel should remain in the curriculum. According to local media, the committee voted 8-5 to recommend retention of the novel. We hope you will uphold the committee's conclusion in making your own recommendation to the school board, which will then make a final decision about the fate of *Part-Time Indian*.

The review committee applied Policy 9130, which instructs it to consider "the appropriateness of the material for the age and maturity level of the students with whom it is being used." The committee's judgment reflects educational experts' consensus that the book is suitable for ninth-grade students. It is an **award-winning and critically acclaimed young-adult novel that is widely taught across the country** and explores salient themes such as race, poverty, bullying, and identity. Among other awards, it has won the National Book Award for Young People's Children Literature (2007), the Book Sense Book of the Year Children's Literature Honor Book (2008), the American Indian Library Association American Indian Youth Literature Award (2008), and the Pacific Northwest Book Award (2008). It was also named a Notable Children's Book by the *New York Times* (2007) and a Favorite Children's Book by the *Los Angeles Times* (2007). *USA Today* said the book is "sure to resonate and lift spirits of all ages for year to come," and *Booklist* praised the novel's ability to help teens, noting that "younger teens looking for the strength to lift themselves out of rough situations would do well to start here."

Complaints about **profanity, violence, and allegedly sexually explicit language focus on decontextualized passages and ignore the value of the work as a whole.** These “objectionable” decontextualized passages provide no justification for removing a valuable work from the curriculum. Otherwise, great works of literature like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Lord of the Flies*, and *Brave New World* would have no place in our classrooms and library because of their respective inclusion of profanity, violence and sexual references. Schools that fail to teach literary works of this magnitude would considerably disadvantage their students.

Cancelling lessons on *Part-Time Indian* at the behest of a few complainants would also ignore **the diversity of opinion within the community** and prioritize their opinions over those of the parents and students who want *Part-Time Indian* to be taught. Schools **violate First Amendment principles** when they arbitrarily remove pedagogically valuable books due to personal objections about content. As courts have observed, no parent has the right “to tell a public school what his or her child will or will not be taught.” *Blau v. Fort Thomas Public School District, et al.*, 401 F.3d 381, 395 (6th Cir. 2005). Many courts, like the Eighth Circuit, recognize the unconstitutional “chilling effect” on First Amendment rights when material is removed because of objections to the ideas (or the language) contained therein. See, e.g., *Pratt v. Independent School District No. 831* 670 F.2d 771, 779 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir., 1982). The Ninth Circuit has specifically recognized that students have a constitutional right to read books selected for their “legitimate educational value.” See *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* 158 F.3d 1022, 1029 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir., 1998).

On a more practical level, removing the book in response to a single complaint may **set a harmful precedent that could incentivize future complaints**, as potential complainants would realize that a challenge based on decontextualized scenes could justify purging disfavored books from the curriculum. This could also lead to **self-censorship among teachers and librarians**, who might select books devoid of thought-provoking content in order to avoid challenges. The losers here, of course, will be the students.

These students are best served when curricular decisions are made by their teachers. As the National Council of English Teachers observes, “Selecting materials requires in-depth knowledge: not just of students’ backgrounds and learning experiences, but also of their abilities and interests; not just of educational objectives, but of the best practices and range and quality of materials for meeting them [...] This level of expertise can be found in the English language arts professional.” Overriding teachers’ professional judgment in an effort to appease complainants sacrifices sound educational principals to subjective feelings of offense. We hope that you will recommend that *Part-Time Indian* be retained in the curriculum, as did the review committee. If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs  
National Coalition Against Censorship



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



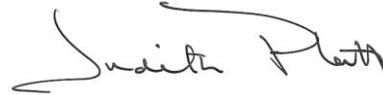
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