

National
Coalition
Against
Censorship



June 18, 2010

Walter Bourke, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Franklin Township Community School Corporation
6141 S. Franklin Road
Indianapolis, IN 46259

Dear Dr. Bourke and Members of the Board of Education:

We write to express concern about the continued challenge to the book *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison in Franklin Central High School's Advanced Placement (AP) English curriculum. We understand that the book was removed from classrooms April 28 after a parent and school board members complained about its content, that a committee of educators and parents then ruled in favor of keeping *Song of Solomon* in Franklin Township's Advanced Placement curriculum, but that their decision will shortly be appealed at the June 21 meeting of the Franklin Township school board, leaving the fate of the book in future AP classes uncertain.

Song of Solomon has been recognized as worthy to stand among the great works of literature. In two separate *New York Times* reviews when it was first published, *Song of Solomon* inspired book reviewer John Leonard to say: "Sometimes you get lucky...I was permitted to review Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*... Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* ... Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*...these are special books...Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* belongs in this small company..." Reynolds Price, also writing for the *New York Times*, noted that "*Song of Solomon* [rises] on the wide slow wings of human sympathy, well-informed wit and the rare plain power to speak wisdom to other human beings...Toni Morrison has earned attention and praise. Few Americans know, and can say, more than she has in this wise and spacious novel."

Song of Solomon is primarily concerned with conveying, through poetic and musical language, the sometimes discomfiting truths of life, including some concerning issues of sexuality and race, as revealed in the fictional lives Morrison creates. Of course, controversy over the literary treatment of such sensitive themes is not new. Acknowledged American classics like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are frequently targeted for censorship by parents who believe they may perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Respected authors have been attacked for their use of racially sensitive language and themes in books that are serious and important literary efforts to confront difficult realities as Americans have lived them.

The racial and sexual themes treated in *Song of Solomon* are essential to the fullness of this rightly renowned novel and are appropriate to the level of material that advanced placement students, most of whom will go on to college, must be able to read and consider. Indeed, if students were prevented from reading literature with such references, they would be deprived of vast areas of our heritage of letters, including the Bible, Shakespeare, the works of Tolstoy, Flaubert, Joyce, Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, and Nabokov, as well as the contributions of contemporary masters like Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon* is broadly recognized as a work of significant literary and artistic merit for which it won the 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award; it was also cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. Ms. Morrison's work is a recognized part of the canon of modern American literature. The Franklin County school district necessarily puts its students at an educational disadvantage in college if it does not introduce them to literature of this sort in high school.

Past the acknowledged distinction of this work, it is clear that the views of the parents and board members who object to the book are not shared by all, and to ban the book might well infringe the First Amendment rights of other parents and their children. As many courts have observed, public schools have the obligation to "administer school curricula responsive to the overall educational needs of the community and its children." *Leebaert v. Harrington*, 332 F.3d 134, 141 (2d Cir. 2003). Parents who object to curricular materials are free to voice their opinions but have no right to have them adopted by the school: "while parents can choose between public and private schools, they do not have a constitutional right to 'direct how a public school teaches their child.'" *Parker v. Hurley*, 514 F. 3d 87, 102 (1st Cir. 2008) (reference omitted) (citing cases).

The practical effect of acceding to any individual request to remove materials will be to invite others to demand changes in the curriculum to reflect their beliefs, leaving school officials vulnerable to multiple, possibly conflicting, demands. The normal response to a parent or student who objects to a particular assignment is to offer an alternative assignment. This would address the concerns of those who seek to limit their exposure to certain words and ideas without infringing the rights of the many others who are eager for a more inclusive and expansive education.

For your information, we enclose a link to the National Coalition Against Censorship's Guide to the First Amendment in Schools:

<http://www.ncac.org/education/schools/index.cfm>

We also suggest you refer to "The Student's Right to Read," a guideline established by the National Council of Teachers of English and available online at:

<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/cens/107616.htm>.

We hope these materials will be useful to you and perhaps to teachers and parents involved in this discussion. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



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