

July 15, 2010

Shannon Snow, Superintendent:
ssnow@stockton.k12.mo.us
Stockton R-1 School District

Chad Pyle, School Board President
Stockton R-1 School District
pyle022@windstream.net

Dear Superintendent Snow, Board Chair Pyle, and other members of the Stockton R-1 Board:

We write concerning the challenge to Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a novel used during the 2009-2010 school year as the all-school read for grades 9-12 in your district. We would like to comment from the viewpoint of the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Library Association, and the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression about this work and our stance on challenges to instructional materials. Please feel free to share this letter with other interested parties in your school, district, and community.

[NCTE](#) is a professional organization of 50,000 members and subscribers devoted to improving literacy teaching and learning at all educational levels. We have more than 100 regional, state, and local affiliates with a total membership of over 22,000, including the Missouri Association of Teachers of English Language Arts. NCTE supports students' right to read and teachers' professional judgment in the selection of books and methods of instruction. NCTE opposes censorship because it "leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values and problems of their culture" ([The Students' Right to Read](#)). In two resolutions NCTE has stood for the selection of materials that "represent a large segment of the community and not the vested interests of a few vocal members" and for the rights of students to have "access to a wide range of books and other learning materials under the guidance of qualified teachers and librarians."

The [National Coalition Against Censorship](#) is an alliance of more than 50 national non-profit literary, religious, artistic, educational, professional, labor and civil liberties groups that are united in their commitment to freedom of expression. Since its founding in 1974, NCAC has worked to protect the First Amendment rights of thousands of authors, teachers, students, librarians, readers and others around the country by providing information, resources, and direct assistance to those in opposing censorship efforts.

The [American Library Association](#) provides leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all. Its [Office of Intellectual Freedom](#) implements ALA policies concerning the concept of intellectual



National
Coalition
Against
Censorship



freedom as embodied in the [Library Bill of Rights](#), the Association's basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials.

The [American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression](#) The American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE) is the bookseller's voice in the fight against censorship. It represents hundreds of independent bookstores throughout the United States.

To get to specifics, there can be no doubt of the literary value of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. This award-winning novel received the 2008 Book Sense Book of the Year Children's Literature Honor Book, the 2008 Pacific Northwest Book Award, the 2008 American Indian Library Association American Indian Youth Literature Award, *The New York Times* Notable Children's Books of 2007, and the Los Angeles Times Favorite Children's Books of 2007. The book was cited in Amazon.com Best Books of 2007, in Barnes & Noble 2007 Best for Teens, as The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon Winner, in Kansas City Star's Top 100 Books of the Year, and as Literature for Today's Young Adults Honor List 1980-2007. The novel received accolades in numerous reviews, including *USA Today* (October 18, 2007) which said the novel is "Sure to resonate and lift spirits of all ages for years to come" and in *Publishers Weekly* (August 20, 2007) whose reviewer praises *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* as emotionally gripping and a thrilling encounter with a teenager struggling with his identity.

As we understand it, the challenge to this book centers on some content in the book, suggesting that the content of the novel is inappropriate for the students and because it does not "reflect [our] community values." It is clear, though, that the language and situations in this work, as in any text under study, must be seen in the context of the entire work. The ethical and literary value of a work is distorted if one focuses only on particular words, passages, or segments. An author's broad moral vision, total treatment of theme, and commitment to realistic portrayal of characters and dialogue are ignored when protesters focus only on aspects that are offensive to them. Unfortunately, there is shock value in isolating and listing selected passages from a book; but this does not reveal anything about the fundamental message or theme in a work and it does not provide insight into its literary quality.

In our experience with school curricula, we have found that there are few instructional materials that do not include *something* that is offensive to *someone*. If literary works that are duly selected by English teaching professionals are removed because the works offend particular individuals or groups, there will soon be little or no literature left to teach in our schools. Further, it would be wrong to assume that the disturbing scenes, profane language, negative events, etc., portrayed in a work are being endorsed by the author, the teacher, or the school. In fact, classroom study provides a fertile ground for students to interpret surface aspects of literature and to exercise critical thinking as they discuss the characters and issues in a work. The novel was chosen specifically for the high school English classes because its complex themes are appropriate for study at that level and because it is a young adult novel that students can draw upon when answering the "critical lens" questions pertinent to literature study in grades 9-12.

We support district policies for selection and review of challenges to instructional materials and emphasize the importance of following these policies when adopting instructional materials and when they are challenged. We understand that your school district has policies for reviewing challenged materials. We also understand that in April the novels were pulled from the classroom and that the board banned the books both from the classroom and from the school library.

We emphasize, however, that all policies must be implemented consistent with the First Amendment, which prohibits public schools from censoring a book because of objections to the ideas it expresses. The complaint that the book does not reflect "community values" is precisely such an attack on the book because of its ideas, and removing a book on that ground would, in our view, be constitutionally suspect.

As we understand it, in this instance the objector did not have a student in the high school. It is unfair and undemocratic for a parent or group to foreclose on the rights of *other* parents to guide and monitor *their* children's readings. Such an act is clearly censorial and we're dismayed that it has occurred in your district.

We urge the school board to rectify this situation at its next meeting by reinstating Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to the district's high school classrooms and library.

Please feel free to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Yours truly,

Millie Davis, Senior Developer, Affiliated Groups and Public Outreach, **National Council of Teachers of English**
mdavis@ncte.org

Joan E. Bertin, Executive Director, **National Coalition Against Censorship**, bertin@ncac.org

Barbara M. Jones, Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom, **American Library Association**, bjones@ala.org

Christopher M. Finan, President, **American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression**, chris@abffe.com

cc: Dean Pate, Vice President, Stockton R-1 School District School Board, dapate@windstream.net
Rodney Shipley, Secretary, Stockton R-1 School District School Board, rollinrodney@yahoo.com
Doug Haines, Member, Stockton R-1 School District School Board, cdzh@windstream.net
Ken Spurgeon, Member, Stockton R-1 School District School Board kwsurgeon@windstream.net
Samuel "Rod" Tucker, Member, Stockton R-1 School District School Board
Gus Rutledge, Member, Stockton R-1 School District School Board