



A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**
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April 25, 2016

Mr. Mike Abbell
Principal
Marion County High School
CC: Members of the Reconsideration Committee
735 East Main Street
Lebanon, KY 40033
Via email: michael.abbell@marion.kyschools.us

Dear Principal Abbell and Members of the Reconsideration Committee,

As organizations dedicated to 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 in regard to the challenge to John Green's *Looking for Alaska* in Marion County High School. As you conduct your review of the critically acclaimed young adult novel, we urge you to keep in mind the educational and constitutional principles that the removal of the novel would compromise.

We understand that a parent filed a formal complaint calling for the book's removal from the school after refusing to sign a permission slip for his child to read it in his 12th grade English class, despite the fact that the student was offered the opportunity to opt out and read an alternate book of his or her choosing. The parent, who admits that he hasn't read the work in full and has taken excerpts from the novel out of context, opposes the profanity and sexual situations in the book, claiming that "this filth is not suitable for any ages." The complainant further states that *Looking for Alaska* would tempt students "to experiment with pornography, sex, drugs, and profanity." He cites the district's student code of conduct barring profanity and "pornography" as reasons for removal. According to our information, the book has been temporarily suspended from the curriculum pending review in response to the complaint.

The complainant has put forth no legitimate rationale for the book's removal, and it is highly doubtful that one could be advanced, particularly given the fact that *Looking for Alaska* is the recipient of numerous honors. The novel is a winner of the American Library Association's prestigious Michael L. Printz Award, which is given annually to "the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit." Green's novel was chosen because he "writes with intimacy, humor, and insight about a world where intense friendship can lead to devastating loss." *Looking for Alaska*, about a teen who attends boarding school and falls in with a wild crowd, deals with issues of friendship, self-discovery and loss—issues that many teenagers, including those Marion County High School, are dealing with themselves. *Kirkus Reviews* called the novel a "gorgeously told tale" that "sings and soars" because of "Green's mastery of language." It is a *New York Times* best-seller, *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist, and is listed as a *Kirkus* Best Book of 2005, 2005 School Library Journal Best Book of the Year, 2005 Booklist Editors' Choice, and American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults Top Ten.

Removing such a book from the curriculum in spite of its clearly recognized value, and in response to

highly subjective complaints about its content, would raise serious constitutional concerns. While a parent is free to voice complaints and request that their child be offered an alternative reading, government officials, including public school administrators, may not prohibit “the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.” *Texas v. Johnson* (1989). See also *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* (1982) (“local school boards may not remove books from school libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books...”.) 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.

The views of those who object to the book are not shared by all, and removing it from the curriculum and possibly from the library as well would violate the rights of parents who want their children to read *Looking for Alaska*. The fact that parents who might object to reading the book had the option of requesting an alternative assignment fully satisfies parents’ desire to control the education of their own children, but would not adversely affect the curriculum as a whole.

Literature helps prepare students for the future by providing opportunities to explore issues they may encounter in life. Young adult novels like *Looking for Alaska* may be especially powerful in this regard because they are so relatable, and, in this case, so well-written.

Decisions about instructional materials should be based on sound educational grounds—the literary and pedagogical merit of a whole work versus the sum of its parts—not on certain individuals’ agreement or disagreement with the message or content of a particular book. This approach is consistent with constitutional and educational principles and is in line with Marion County Public School policy. We urge you to demonstrate your commitment to these goals by restoring *Looking for Alaska* to the Marion County High School curriculum and ensure that it remains on library shelves.

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

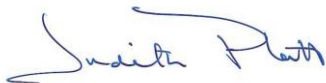
Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



Chris Finan, Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Judy Platt, Director
Free Expression Advocacy
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Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
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