



A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**
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April 5, 2016

Dr. Jerri Lynn Lippert
Superintendent
CC: Board of Education
West Allegheny School District
P.O. Box 55
Imperial, PA 15126
Via email: jlippert@westasd.org

Dear Superintendent Lippert and Members of the West Allegheny Board of Education,

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 with concern regarding the removal of Jeanette Walls' *The Glass Castle* from West Allegheny High School's ninth grade reading list. The decision appears to have been made after some parents complained about the content of the book, raising concerns about censorship. We urge you to institute a clear, transparent process of decision-making so that West Allegheny School District can be prepared to respond to future parental concerns without creating the impression that important pedagogical decisions are made in reaction to external pressure.

We understand from an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that parents first raised concerns about *The Glass Castle* at the West Allegheny School District's February 17 board meeting, and then again at the March 16 meeting, where they complained about parents' lack of awareness of the content of books teachers were assigning to students. Several books on the ninth grade reading list were mentioned, including *The Glass Castle*. Some parents called the book "explicit," "inappropriate," and "trash," with one parent saying that she felt 'extremely saddened' after reading the memoir herself. At the March 16 meeting, administrators from the district informed parents that the book had already been pulled "after careful consideration." Instead, students will be taught excerpts from the novel.

We understand that a committee of teachers has traditionally been responsible for choosing books based on their relevance, and that teachers don't "dissect" them until they begin planning lessons a month before teaching each particular book. According to Assistant to the Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Chris Assetta, it was during the 'dissection' that teachers "felt that many of the passages would not be appropriate for ninth-grade students." The dissection, in this case, seems to have come after the February 17 board meeting and, rather than serving to prepare lesson plans, which appears to be its

intended purpose, became an occasion to pull the book from the curriculum and only teach excerpts from it instead.

The timing of the decision has left the impression that a book with clear literary merit – *The Glass Castle* is a highly-regarded book recommended by *School Library Journal* for grades nine and up, and is a 2006 Young Adult Library Services Association ALA Alex Award winner – was removed under pressure, possibly setting a dangerous precedent.

As you are aware, removing a book from the reading list because of parental complaints raises serious constitutional concerns by favoring the subjective viewpoints of some over others, and disserves the educational interests of the student body as a whole. 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* (1969); see also *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* (1982) (“local school boards may not remove books simply because they dislike the ideas contained in these books.”)

Decisions about instructional material should be made on sound educational grounds, by weighing the value of the material as a whole, and should include a thorough rationale with reasons for the work’s inclusion in the curriculum. Having a clear and transparent procedure in which this is undertaken *before* releasing the district’s book list not only protects in the integrity of the curriculum and the teachers who utilize their expertise to choose material wisely, but also enables the district to be prepared when parents do voice concerns. Doing so ensures that these decisions do not appear to have been made without proper consideration or raise concerns about censorship when a book is removed from the curriculum.

We have attached guidelines suggested by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that we hope will be helpful for you moving forward, and we are happy to advise you further in this endeavor. Ensuring that policies and procedures for the selection of instructional materials are public and transparent, and making decisions based on sound pedagogical grounds, is an approach consistent with constitutional and educational principles and will serve the interests of both the West Allegheny Public School District and its students.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you need further assistance.

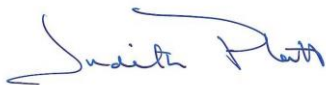
Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
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American Booksellers for Free Expression



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