



A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**
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American Booksellers for Free Expression
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
Association of American Publishers

May 20, 2016

Jeremy Olson
Superintendent
Henning School District
500 School Avenue
Henning, MN 56551
Via email: jolson@henning.k12.mn.us

Dear Mr. Olson,

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 from Henning School Library of the award-winning graphic novel *This One Summer*, by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki.

It is our understanding that a local parent complained about the book, expressing the view that no child, regardless of age or grade, should be able to read the book. While Henning School District has no formal policy on challenges to library materials, the book was removed from the library shelves because it was deemed “vulgar” by a school librarian, and the Principal, and yourself.

This One Summer is a critically acclaimed graphic novel that earned a 2015 Caldecott Honor for illustration and a 2015 Michael A. Printz Honor for outstanding teen books, among many other awards. Caldecott Honors are given to illustrated books aimed towards readers up to 14 years of age (the publisher lists *This One Summer* for readers age 12 and up). *Booklist*'s starred review calls *This One Summer* a “coming-of-age tale about the awkward transition from carefree childhood to jaded, self-conscious young adulthood.” *Kirkus Reviews*, in its starred review, says it is “[k]eely observed and gorgeously illustrated—a triumph.” *School Library Journal* recommends the book for grades 8 and up. While the book may be above the maturity and reading level of elementary school students, its value for young adults at the high school level has been recognized by leading professionals.

Restricting a book with established literary merit in school libraries, without proper review, raises serious concerns. The First Amendment precludes public officials from suppressing ideas simply because some people find them offensive or controversial. See *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 872 (1982) (plurality opinion) (School officials “may not remove books from library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books....”). This constitutional principle is of particular importance in the school library, which is “a place where students may freely and voluntarily explore diverse topics.” *Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board*, 64 F. 3d 184, 190 (5th Cir.1995).

While it is true that the court in *Pico* gave school administrators some discretion to limit speech in a school environment when it is found to be “pervasively vulgar,” we are aware of no objective standard by which *This One Summer* could be found pervasively vulgar: there is no basis to conclude that a book is pervasively vulgar simply because it contains a number of instances of profanity. The book is part of the collections of school libraries across the United States. It has been challenged occasionally, but, as far as we are aware, has been consistently kept in those collections. Your removal of *This One Summer* from the

library solely on the basis of occasional profanity opens the door for parents to request the removal of a great deal of literature that is standard fare in school libraries, including classic works such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Black Boy*, and *Beloved*.

Fundamentally, school officials' decisions about instructional and library materials must be based on valid pedagogical objectives, and concerns about occasional coarse language or sensitive themes should be considered in that context. This would not only assure that students at Henning School will be exposed to a wide range of literary texts, but that the school would be able to respond consistently to future challenges that seek to remove books because of a few profane words.

It is especially troubling that Henning School District maintains no formal policy on the selection and reconsideration of library materials that specifies procedures for complaints by citizens. Citizens have a right to expect elected officials to follow established procedures, and their failure to do so raises due process concerns about arbitrary government action. This is particularly true when First Amendment rights are implicated.

Parents who object to the book could easily supervise their children's reading choices. However, restricting student access violates the rights of students whose parents want their children to have access to a wider diversity of material. The library's primary role is to allow students to make choices according to their own interests, experiences, and values. As a practical matter, acceding to any demand to remove material potentially exposes the school to multiple, possibly conflicting demands from others seeking accommodation for different views and beliefs. Decisions about school materials should be made for sound educational reasons and follow established policy, not because some people may or may not agree with the content.

We strongly urge you to restore *This One Summer* to the Henning School Library and to adopt a formal policy for the reconsideration of library materials. Any other decision threatens the principle that is essential to individual freedom, democracy, and a good education: the right to read, inquire, question, and think for ourselves.

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



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