



A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**

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By **Electronic Mail**—amanda.cooper@nassau.k12.fl.us

August 25, 2016

Principal Amanda Cooper and the Members of the Intellectual Freedom Committee
Yulee Middle School
84539 Miner Road
Yulee, Florida 32097

Re: Challenges to Library Books

Dear Ms. Cooper and the Members of the Intellectual Freedom Committee:

As a coalition of organizations dedicated to promoting the freedom to read, with over 40 years of experience dealing with book challenges nationwide, we are concerned about recent requests to remove “controversial” books from Yulee Middle School’s library. It is our understanding that some parents have asked for Lauren Myracle’s *TTYL* and *TTFN* to be removed from the library because of objections to the content and ideas in the books, specifically references to sex, stripping, and alcohol use. We write to recommend against the removal of the books and to offer information about the issues that are implicated when books are challenged in public schools.

1. The special role of the school library

In addressing whether challenged works of fiction should remain in school libraries, the primary consideration for school officials must be whether the book has educational, literary, entertainment, or other value for students. The value of a book is ordinarily best assessed by professional reviews and by the considered judgments of librarians and teachers who are knowledgeable about effective teaching tools and are familiar with the reading and maturity levels, interests, and needs of students in the school.

School libraries play a critical educational role, offering books that supplement the curriculum and providing an accessible—for some, the only—source of optional reading material. Educators rely on them not only to enrich the academic program but also to help excite a love of reading in students. Since students vary widely in their intellectual development, reading skills, life circumstances, tastes, and interests, and since the library serves the entire school community, professional educators select a wide variety of books to provide options for *all* students, while acknowledging that no book is right for *every* student. In most cases, the best guidance for individual students can be provided by a librarian or teacher who is familiar with that student’s

interests, needs, and abilities. Parents, of course, are always free to guide their children's choice of library books.

The books that have been challenged unquestionably serve a valuable educational function in the school library. The plots are ingeniously conveyed through a series of text messages, using what is for contemporary students a familiar form and language. This unique method of storytelling prompted a librarian reviewing the book for Amazon to comment that it "will inspire teens to pass it to their friends and will suggest to nascent writers that experimenting with nonnarrative communication can be a great way to tell a story." Respected and popular author John Green, reviewing the book for *Booklist*, writes that the book "cleverly manages to build rich characters and narrative tension without ever taking the story outside of an IM box." A *Scholastic* review echoes these sentiments: "The distinctive voices of the three girls, as captured in their IMs, give this novel authenticity and heart. It's an epistolary novel for the twenty-first century..." The books were also praised by other reputable reviewers, including *Goodreads* (*TTYL* is a "winning, satisfyingly dramatic tale)," *Publishers Weekly* (*TTYL* "will appeal to teenage girls who can relate to both the format and the struggles experienced by [the main character's] friends)," and *School Library Journal* (*TTYL* "will inspire teens to pass it to their friends"; *TTFN* is "easy to get into and fun to follow.") While the novel may not appeal to all students in middle school, it will undoubtedly appeal to some.

2. Legal concerns

The complaining parents find some of the content and ideas in this book objectionable, and they are free to guide their own children's choice of reading material as they see fit. Government officials, however, 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*, 491 U.S. 397, 414 (1989). The Supreme Court has cautioned that school officials may not remove books from library shelves "simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books" *Board of Education v. Pico* 457 U.S. 853, 872 (1982) (plurality opinion). Many courts have also recognized the unconstitutional "chilling effect" on First Amendment rights when material is removed because of objections to the ideas contained therein. See, e.g., *Pratt v. Independent School District No. 831* 670 F.2d 771, 779 (8th Cir., 1982). Other courts have recognized that students have a constitutional right to read books selected for their "legitimate educational value." See *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District*, 158 F.3d 1022, 1029 (9th Cir., 1998). Failure to adhere to these principles exposes the District to potential liability under the First Amendment.

It follows that a book may not be removed from a library simply because it offends someone's notion of "community standards". In today's heterogeneous and diverse communities, people of good faith will disagree on what should be considered offensive, inappropriate, or politically incorrect. A decision to remove the books would ignore the diversity of opinion in Nassau County and prioritize the moral views of the complainants over those of other community members. Such an action would discount the opinions of the many parents who may want their children to read books like *TTYL* and *TTFN* and thus sacrifice democratic values to the demands of those who insist that library holdings include only those materials consistent with their personal values.

Moreover, there are compelling educational and practical reasons to adhere to these First Amendment principles; removing books that some parents consider objectionable inevitably invites objections from other parents who object to different content in other books. The attempt

“to eliminate everything that is objectionable...will leave public schools in shreds. Nothing but educational confusion and a discrediting of the public school system can result....” *McCullum v. Board of Educ.*, 332 U.S. 203, 235 (1948) (Jackson, J. concurring).

Please let us know if we can be of any further assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



Joan Bertin, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship



Lin Oliver, Executive Director
Society of Children’s Books Writers and
Illustrators



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



Judith Platt, Director, Free Expression
Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Millie Davis, Director
Intellectual Freedom Center
National Council of Teachers of English



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
Authors Guild



Chris Finan, Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Fatima Shaikh, Co-Chair, Children’s and
Young Adult Book Authors
PEN America