

Director Ross Hunter
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November 21, 2016

Dear Director Hunter and Assistant Director Bezborodnikova,

As organizations devoted to protecting the right of young people to access a diverse range of reading materials, we write to express our concerns about one of the Training Quality Standards in Washington's Early Achievers Program. The Standard states that "books that glorify violence in any way or show frightening images are not considered to be appropriate" for children (Indicator 5.4).

The Standard is excessively vague and overbroad and thus likely to pressure childcare providers to avoid pedagogically valuable reading materials. We call on the Department of Early Learning to rewrite this standard and ensure that childcare providers are free to use their educational expertise and familiarity with their individual pupils' needs in selecting appropriate reading materials.

The Standard is presumably designed to ensure that childcare providers do not unnecessarily scare young children. However, the vagueness of Indicator 5.4 may do more harm than good. Many classic fairy tales, for instance, have "frightening images." Consider the wolf devouring the grandmother in *Little Red Riding Hood* or the witch trying to shove Hansel and Gretel into the oven. Non-fiction books may also be considered frightening, as some children might be afraid of pictures of natural disasters or large animals like lions, bears, and dinosaurs.

Many experts have noted that books with "frightening images" may help children overcome fears. Luther Clegg, chairman of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas Christian University, for instance, argues that frightening books can "help children identify acceptable ways of dealing with fear [and] realize and avoid inherent dangers in situations that have potential for harm."¹ English Professor Jackie E. Stallcup observes that children's books often "seek to reassure children that they have nothing to fear from imaginary dangers."² And in a study of children's responses to frightening fairy tales, Children's

¹ Luther B. Clegg, "Using Children's Literature to Help Children Cope with Fear," *Educational Horizons*, Spring 1996.

² Jackie E. Stallcup, "Power, Fear, and Children's Picture Books," *Children's Literature*, Vol. 30, 2002.

Literature Professor Ann Trousdale concludes that adults should “question the value of attempting to soften the fairy tales by removing any violence from them.” She notes that children “find ways to cope with the fearful elements” of fairy tales with happy endings.³ Numerous other experts have also explained how books can use frightening themes to help children confront their fears.⁴

The “frightening images” standard is likely to prevent childcare providers in Washington from selecting many classic children’s books. Indeed, we have received reports that childcare providers have chosen not to read books such as *Where the Wild Things Are*, *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*, and some of Mother Goose’s stories because they fear losing their subsidies.

Indicator 5.4 thus prevents childcare providers from tailoring their curricula to their children’s unique circumstances. It is difficult, if not impossible, for government officials to predict what images might scare a very young child unless they are familiar with the child’s fears, emotions, and personal history. For example, a toddler who was once scratched by a cat may reasonably be afraid of the images in *The Cat in the Hat*, and a toddler who was in a car accident may fear the drawings in Richard Scarry’s *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go*. Childcare providers should be given the discretion to select books for children in their classes, as the providers can use their familiarity with individual children to ensure books do not inappropriately frighten them.

Although participation in the Early Achievers program is technically voluntary, the Early Start Act of 2015 requires all childcares that accept state subsidies to participate in the program. Thus, childcares that fail to provide “appropriate” books will imperil their financial wellbeing. For teachers in such programs, self-censorship is likely to be preferable to loss of funding.

We strongly urge the Department of Early Learning to rewrite Indicator 5.4 in a manner that eliminates vagueness and enables childcare providers to use their expertise in selecting books that are appropriate for the specific children in their charge. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of any assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



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



Chris Finan, Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression

³ Ann Trousdale, “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad, Wolf?” *Children’s Literature in Education*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1989)

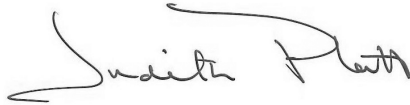
⁴ See, for instance, Cornelia Hoogland, “Educational Uses of Story: Reclaiming Story as Art,” *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1998; and Janice I. Nicholson and Quinn M. Pearson, “Helping Children Cope with Fears: Using Children’s Literature in Classroom Guidance.”



Brianna Hoffman, President
Washington Library Association



James LaRue, Director
Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association



Judith Platt, Director
Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
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