

November 17, 2016

Evelyn Rafalowski, Director of Schools, evelyn.rafalowski@sullivank12.net
Dan Wells, Board Chairman, dan.wells@sullivank12.net
Randall Jones, Board Member, randall.jones@sullivank12.net
Jerry Greene, Board Member, jerry.greene@sullivank12.net
Jane Thomas, Board Member, jane.thomas@sullivank12.net
Michael Hughes, Board Member, michael.hughes@sullivank12.net
Mark Ireson, Board Member, mark.ireson@sullivank12.net
Matthew Spivey, Board Member, matthew.spivey@sullivank12.net

Dear Director Rafalowski, members of the Board, and members of the Review Committee,

As organizations concerned with protecting the freedom to read, we write to share some key considerations affecting your review of a recent formal parental complaint that calls for the removal of Pearson's *My World History* textbook from the seventh-grade curriculum in Sullivan County.

It is our understanding that Michelle Edmisten, the parent of a seventh-grader at Bluff City Middle School, filed Form 4.404.F2 on November 4, formally requesting the removal of the Pearson textbook. According to local media, Ms. Edmisten's complaint notes the textbook displays "bias" and fails to "teach the history of Islam in truth or entirety." In speeches before the school board and postings on the Facebook page of Sullivan County Parents Against Islamic Indoctrination, an organization she appears to lead, Ms. Edmisten has also claimed that the Pearson textbook indoctrinates children in Islam and violates her daughter's religious beliefs. Ms. Edmisten's daughter has, indeed, refused to complete several assignments on Islam.

It is impossible for any book—let alone a seventh-grade world history textbook—to convey the history of Islam in its entirety. What Ms. Edmisten views as authorial bias may very well be the result of necessary decisions concerning the material that must be omitted from any introductory overview of a religion.

Educating students about Islam does not constitute indoctrination. Education seeks to inform students about belief systems. Indoctrination in a belief system, in contrast, attempts to convince students that subjective or faith-based elements of a belief system are objective truths.

Factual lessons about Islamic theology do not constitute an endorsement of Islam at the expense of other faiths. Students are taught what Muslims believe; they are not being persuaded that such beliefs are correct (or incorrect). In this sense, lessons on Islam are no

different from lessons on Judaism, Catholicism, and other religious belief systems. A school's goal is to help students understand the belief systems, not to convince students of the systems' value or lack thereof.

Educating students about major religions promotes tolerance and historical awareness. Both are vital to the flourishing of our democracies. As the National Council for the Social Studies observes, "our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments [and] know the past." In an increasingly interconnected world, knowledge of the past cannot be limited to knowledge of one's own cultural traditions.

Removing a textbook because it offends the beliefs of some parents raises serious First Amendment concerns. As the US Supreme Court has ruled, government may not discriminate against "the expression of an idea simply because society [or a parent] finds the idea offensive or disagreeable" *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 414 (1989). Specifically relating to public schools, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals concluded, "A student's First Amendment rights are infringed when books that have been determined by the school district to have legitimate educational value are removed from a mandatory reading list" *Monteiro v. Tempe Union School Dist.* 153 F. 3d 1022, 1029 (1998).

Teaching about world religions does not mean endorsing any specific religious tradition. Nor are schools required to change the curriculum in response to parents whose beliefs are offended by the inclusion of a specific religion in the curriculum. In *Sherman v. Community Consolidated School District 21*, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals observed that "the diversity of religious tenets in the United States ensures that *anything* a school teaches will offend the scruples and contradict the principles of some if not many persons [...] Government nonetheless retains the right to set the curriculum in its own schools" 980 F. 2d 437, 444-445 (1992). Similarly, the Eleventh Circuit has noted that the fact that parents find material offensive to their religious beliefs does not mean that schools have violated the Establishment Clause, especially when materials are chosen for the clear "secular purpose of education in the areas of history and social studies." *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County* 827 F.2d 684, 693 (1987).

We recommend that the review committee take into account these considerations when reviewing the Pearson textbook. For more on this issue of teaching about religious traditions, we invite you to read NCAC's [resource](#): *Islam in the Classroom: Teaching About Religion Is Not Religious Indoctrination*.

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

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



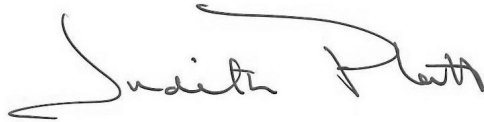
Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



Chris Finan, Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



James LaRue, Director
Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association



Judith Platt, Director
Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Fatima Shaik, Co-Chair
Children's and Young Adult Book Committee