

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

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Chairwoman Frances Bohon
Curriculum and Instruction Committee
School District of Marshfield
1010 E. Fourth Street
Marshfield, WI 54449

February 21, 2017

Dear Chairwoman Bohon and the Members of the Curriculum and Instruction Committee,

On behalf of the Kids' Right to Read Project, an initiative of the National Coalition Against Censorship that promotes access to literature in public schools, we write to share some considerations that we hope the Committee will take into account while reviewing Jeanette Walls' memoir *The Glass Castle* for inclusion in the tenth-grade curriculum.

It is our understanding that *The Glass Castle* is required reading for tenth-graders in the District. In December, a parent addressed the school board and complained about the book's "foul language and explicit and disturbing materials" such as addiction and mental illness. He filed a formal complaint, and the Committee will now reexamine the District's use of the book. *The Glass Castle* spent 261 weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller List and is widely recognized as a work of significant literary and artistic merit. It has received many awards, including the ALEX Award, the Christopher Award and the Evergreen Young Adult Book Award.

As the Committee must be aware, decisions about instructional materials should serve all students in the District and should be made on sound educational and policy grounds, not to placate parents who may dislike isolated passages in a book.

First, we note that students will benefit from discussing poverty, hunger, bullying, assault, alcoholism, and the other themes discussed in *The Glass Castle*. Many of these problems may affect the lives of the District's students. When a school district in Pennsylvania banned *The Glass Castle* for similar reasons in 2016, a student created a petition and gathered the signatures of over two hundred peers. She noted that while efforts to ban the books were motivated by an effort to "protect the children," they actually were "sheltering them and making them ignorant to issues that actually plague society and are relevant right now...you are pretending that sexual assault and alcoholism isn't something that youths encounter. And that is a problem." Indeed, it is of considerable importance that young adults, especially those who are fortunate enough not to

grapple with these problems on a daily basis, understand the origins and ramifications of these problems.

Second, District policies support keeping *The Glass Castle* in the curriculum. Policy 2240 acknowledges that “the consideration of controversial issues has a legitimate place in the instructional program.” The mere discussion of the controversial themes present in *The Glass Castle* therefore provides no justification for removing it from the curriculum. Otherwise, countless great works of literature such as *The Sun Also Rises* (alcoholism), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (rape), *The Grapes of Wrath* (poverty), *Night* (hunger), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (offensive language) would be purged from our schools.

Similarly, Policy 9130 instructs the Committee to primarily consider “the appropriateness of the material for the age and material level of the students.” Educational experts generally recommend *The Glass Castle* for grades 9-12. Permanent removal of the book in response to this complaint is also an unnecessary measure, as the complainant can, pursuant to District Policy 2240, simply request an alternative assignment for his child.

On a more practical level, **removing *The Glass Castle* will set a precedent that could undermine the quality of education in Marshfield by inviting** invite future parental complaints that can burden District committees and ultimately result in a curriculum devoid of thought-provoking literature. As Justice Jackson warned in *McCullum v. Board of Education* 333 U.S. 203, 235 (1948), “If we are to eliminate everything that is objectionable [...] we will leave public education in shreds. Nothing but educational confusion and a discrediting of the public school system can result.”

Finally, removal would also **ignore the diversity of opinion on moral issues within the community and** prioritize the ethical, moral, and religious views of a sole complainant over those of the parents and students who want *The Glass Castle* to be taught. Such action raises **First Amendment concerns**. Many courts, like the Eighth Circuit, recognize 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). The Ninth Circuit specifically 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).

We hope the Committee will keep these considerations in mind when reviewing *The Glass Castle*, and we urge the Committee to recommend that the book be kept in the curriculum. Please let us know whether we can be of any further assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director

National Coalition Against Censorship

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



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



Judith Platt, Director
Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
Authors Guild