

Superintendent Stephen Guthrie
Carroll County Public Schools
125 North Court Street
Westminster, MD 21157

By electronic mail: shguthr@carrollk12.org

February 28, 2017

Dear Superintendent Guthrie,

As a coalition of organizations dedicated to promoting freedom of expression in public school systems, we write to express our concern about a recent incident in Carroll County Public Schools (CCPS) in which teachers were told to remove posters because a complainant insisted they were “political” and “anti-Trump.” Rather than ensuring political neutrality within the school system, the removal will stifle discussion of an important social issue and imperil any future discussions of similar socially prominent topics.

The posters are entitled “We The People” and were created by the prominent street artist Shephard Fairey. They depict American women—including Muslim-American and African-American women—in the colors of the American flag. They contain captions such as “We The People Defend Dignity” and “We The People Stand With Each Other.” Mr. Fairey created the posters for “a nonpartisan campaign dedicated to igniting a national dialogue about American identity and values through public art and story sharing.” Several teachers hung the posters in their classrooms, but the administration ordered their removal after a staff member complained that they were “anti-Trump.”

Schools do have an interest in preventing teachers from engaging in partisan political activities while on the job, as specified in CCPS Policy GBI. CCPS would be perfectly justified in preventing teachers from creating displays that strongly favor or oppose a candidate, party, officeholder, or legislative proposal and thus create an impression that the school endorses a particular partisan political position.

However, the simple act of displaying the “We The People” posters does not constitute partisan political advocacy. The images do not advocate for or against President Trump, the Republican Party, or their policies, nor do they call on viewers to take political action in support of or opposition to a specific cause.

On the contrary, the posters directly advance the goals of CCPS Policy IGAA by emphasizing the experiences of minority women and promoting values such as heritage and diversity. They encourage viewers to think critically the complex relationships between self-identity as a minority and self-identity as an American.

Joan E. Bertin
Executive Director

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
PEN American Center
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church,
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

In order to encourage civic education, it is crucial that our schools promote critical thinking about these types of social questions. Not only does the removal of the posters impede such discussions, but it also sets a dangerous precedent that risks stifling dialogue about other sociopolitical issues.

By removing the “We the People” posters, CCPS has demonstrated to teachers that discussion of highly topical issues such as citizenship is subject to censorship if anyone complains of bias or a failure to show “both sides.” Out of fear of discipline, teachers may choose to avoid such conversations, dealing a blow to civic education. The losers, as always, will be the students.

We hope that CCPS will allow its teachers to exhibit both the “We the People” posters and other relevant, thought-provoking displays. Doing so is by no means incompatible with remaining politically neutral.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Svetlana Mintcheva". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'S'.

Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship