

N Kids'
C Right
A to Read
C Project

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

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American Booksellers for Free Expression
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Association of American Publishers

Dr. Rick Cobb, Superintendent
Mid-Del School District
7217 SE 15th Street
Midwest City, OK 73110

By electronic mail: rcobb@mid-del.net

March 6, 2017

Dear Superintendent Cobb,

As a coalition of organizations dedicated to promoting the right to read, we write to share some relevant pedagogical and legal principles as the review committee considers whether *Stuck in the Middle*, an anthology of illustrated tales edited by Ariel Schrag, should remain in libraries in the Mid-Del School District. We would also like to raise some serious concerns about Policy I-16, which requires school officials to temporarily remove a book pending committee review.

It is our understanding that *Stuck in the Middle* was removed from the library in Del Crest Middle School following parental complaints claiming that the book's language and adult themes - such as drug use and sex - make it unsuitable for the school library. Pursuant to Policy I-16, a review committee will meet in order to discuss the graphic novel and to issue a recommendation to the school board.

Stuck in the Middle presents seventeen stories by a variety of award-winning graphic novelists that address many of the issues and choices faced by teenagers today. The book received praise from professional review sources such as *Booklist*, *New York Times*, and *Publishers Weekly*, and it was selected for New York Public Library's "Books for the Teen Age" list in 2008. It has been challenged—and retained—multiple times, including in Maine and in Texas. Editor Ariel Schrag, defending the book from one such challenge, wrote:

“In terms of foul language, sexual content, and teen smoking in this book, all the authors strove to present the teens and pre-teens in a realistic light. We may not like all of the decisions teenagers make, but if we sanitize their speech and behavior in our stories, our characters won't be authentic [...] Banning the book isn't going to

change children’s behavior or somehow save them from the hard truths of teenage life.”

1. Educational and Legal Implications of Removing *Stuck in the Middle*

Decisions about media materials should serve all students in the District. This can best be accomplished if the decisions are made on sound educational grounds. Libraries should offer a diverse collection of reading materials designed to stimulate a love of literature, to help students learn about the world in which they are growing up, and to anticipate real-life problems. Although complainants object to the themes discussed in *Stuck in the Middle*, the book provides perspectives on problems that teenagers encounter on a daily basis. It presents these problems in a highly accessible form in order to help teens confront challenging and confusing issues such as sexuality, bullying, loneliness, friendship, and fitting in.

The presence of allegedly offensive language and so-called “adult themes” provides no justification for removing an educationally valuable work such as *Stuck in the Middle* from the library. Otherwise, countless classics such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (profanity), *Brave New World* (drug use), and *Romeo and Juliet* (sex) could justifiably be censored. Any school that fails to provide access to this type of literature on grounds of use of “offensive language” or presence of “adult themes” will greatly disadvantage its students who choose to attend college and enroll in literature classes.

In addition to possibly incentivizing additional complaints, permanent removal of *Stuck in the Middle* would ignore the diversity of opinion on moral issues within the community and prioritize the ethical views of a vociferous group of complainants over those of the parents and students who want the book to remain in the library. Libraries are designed to contain a wide range of books so every reader has access to literature that appeals to him or her. Not every book will appeal to every student and parent. To this end, complainants who object to *Stuck in the Middle* can simply forbid their children from reading it; the book is one of many available library books, and no student is required to read it. These objecting parents have no right, however, to deny students who want to read *Stuck in the Middle* access to the book.

The removal of *Stuck in the Middle* from the library also raises First Amendment concerns. 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, 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).

2. Troubling Aspects of Policy I-16

Policy I-16 instructs school officials to “temporarily withdraw [challenged] material pending a decision of the review committee.” The automatic withdrawal of challenged materials while they are under review potentially enables a single parent to wreak havoc upon a library or curriculum. A complainant can file multiple requests, thus burdening review committees and essentially

guaranteeing that disfavored material is removed from the library or curriculum for several months—if not longer. This denies students access to valuable materials and creates needlessly complicated administrative burdens for staff. Repeatedly removing media materials may incentivize librarians and teachers to shun challenging works of current and vital interest to students, and select dull and uninspiring books in order to avoid further complaints.

The overwhelming majority of school districts with which we have worked allow challenged materials to remain in classrooms and libraries unless and until a review committee or board of education commands their removal. We strongly urge you to recommend the reinstatement *Stuck in the Middle* pending review and to suspend application of Policy I-16 pending an evaluation of its educational and policy implications.

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

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



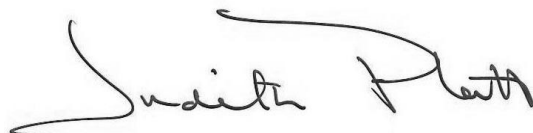
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