

N Kids'
C Right
A to Read
C Project

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

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Jerome Middle School
520 10th Avenue West
Jerome, Idaho 83338
April 24, 2017

To the Members of the Review Committee:

As organizations dedicated to promoting young people's right to read, we write to share some serious concerns that we hope you consider when deciding whether the manga *Sword Art Online: Aincrad*, written by Reki Kawahara and illustrated by Tamako Nakamura, should remain in the library at Jerome Middle School. Removal of the manga based on a few individuals' subjective dislike of its content would not only undermine educational goals, but would also raise serious First Amendment concerns.

It is our understanding that the chair of the English Department filed a formal complaint against *Sword Art Online: Aincrad* after a student expressed concerns about the manga's content. The chair's complaint claims that the manga contains "inappropriate language (dicking around, shit, damn, bastard, ass) and drawings." These allegedly inappropriate drawings are presumably images of a female character wearing underwear and sharing a bed with a male character. *Sword Art Online: Aincrad* is currently in circulation in the library and is accessible to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. It is a popular book among students and has been checked out dozens of times this year.

Sword Art Online is a Japanese franchise that originated as a light novel series and has gone on to be adapted as video games, manga and an animated series widely available on Netflix and Cartoon Network. It is set in a near-future virtual reality massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Players in the game use a specialized helmet to play, but a technological flaw makes it impossible to log out, effectively trapping the players in the game. The manga draws heavily on fantasy tropes such as elves, dwarves, and monsters. Its publisher rates the series as "Teen." The series is a top-ten manga in both Japan and the United States. Over twenty million copies have been printed worldwide.

School libraries play a critical educational role, offering books that supplement the curriculum and providing an accessible—and for some students, the sole—source of recreational and optional reading material. Educators rely on libraries to help foster a lifelong love of reading in their students. Because students, even those of the same age, vary widely in their intellectual development, reading skills, life circumstances, and interests, it is crucial that libraries maintain a wide range of reading materials. Librarians must provide reading options for all students while acknowledging that no book is right for every student. In addressing whether challenged works of fiction should remain in school libraries, the primary consideration for school officials must be whether the works have educational or entertainment value for students.

Sword Art Online: Aincrad clearly helps fulfill this objective. Manga, and graphic novels generally, are attractive reading options for students. In many cases, these books are the source material for popular media that they enjoy at home, creating a powerful motivator for reading that is especially effective for reluctant readers. Graphic novels and manga contain nuanced plots, characters, and situations that engage verbal and visual literacy skills. A 2013 Tama University study finds that children read and reread manga many times, which helps promote the development of language and reading comprehension skills. The format is an invaluable asset for improving the quality and quantity of reading among students. Although this particular manga will not appeal to all students, it will surely appeal to many.

In addition to undermining the vital educational goal of promoting reading, removal of *Sword Art Online: Aincrad* raises several pragmatic, ethical, and legal concerns. First, removal of the manga will **set a harmful precedent that may lead to additional, frivolous challenges to library or curricular materials containing “foul language” or suggestive imagery**. The mere presence of language that some may see as objectionable, including words that many teenagers speak and hear on a daily basis, provides no justification for banning a valuable book. Were it otherwise, many great works of literature would be subjected to censorship. Nor do any of the images in *Sword Art Online: Aincrad* constitute material that is considered harmful to minors. Indeed, the situations depicted in the manga – and much more explicit ones – are present in many a verbal narrative available to young people. The fact that they are visually presented does not in itself make them inappropriate for the age group. Indeed, art history textbooks and museum displays contain nudity, violence and suggestive material and have never been known to harm young audiences.

Second, removal would **prioritize the concerns and viewpoints of offended readers over those of the students who want to read *Sword Art Online: Aincrad***. This would ignore the diversity of opinion in Jerome, sacrificing democratic values to the demands of would-be censors who insist library holdings include only those materials consistent with their personal values. No one is forced to read the manga. Those parents who do not want their children to read the book can instruct them to avoid it. However, they have no right to prevent others from accessing the book.

Third, we note that removing books with educational value **raises significant First Amendment concerns and may expose the District to legal liability**. 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). 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).

Finally, **removal undermines the objectives of District policies**. Policy 2510, Selection of Library Materials, states that the objective of District libraries is “to provide a wide range of materials on all appropriate levels of difficulty, with diversity of appeal [...]” The Board has also reaffirmed “the principles of intellectual freedom inherent in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States and expressed in the School Library Bill of Rights,” which calls on libraries to “challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.”

Narrowly restricting the manga to students of a certain age level or a certain grade, as some staff members have reportedly proposed, is not a viable solution. Many younger students have greater reading skills and maturity than their older peers. Within the library, students' reading choices should be guided by the librarian, not determined mechanically by one-size-fits-all age brackets.

For these reasons, we strongly recommend that *Sword Art Online: Aincrad* be retained in the middle school library. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can be of any further assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



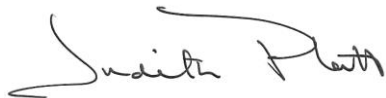
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