

Dr. Trish Perry
New London-Spicer Middle School
101 4th Avenue SW
New London, MN

By electronic mail: perryt@nls.k12.mn.us

May 22, 2017

Dear Principal Perry,

As a coalition of organizations devoted to protecting the right of students to read and discuss works of literary merit, we write to urge you to keep *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (henceforth, *Part-Time Indian*) by Sherman Alexie in the eighth-grade curriculum. Removal of this book based on a few individuals' complaints would undermine educational goals and raise serious First Amendment concerns.

It is our understanding that at a Board meeting on May 8, several parents objected to the content of *Part-Time Indian*, claiming that the book's use of profanity and references to sex are inappropriate and "conflict with the traditional family values held by many in this community." The objecting parents said that an alternative assignment for their children did not resolve their concerns and demanded the removal of the book from the curriculum. The parents then filed a formal complaint against the book. Pursuant to District Policy 7000, you will meet with the complainants and seek a resolution. If there is no resolution, the complainants may then request a meeting with the superintendent and then with the Board of Education.

Part-Time Indian is an award-winning and critically acclaimed young-adult novel that is widely taught across the country. Among other awards, it has won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature (2007), the Book Sense Book of the Year Children's Literature Honor Book (2008), the American Indian Library Association American Indian Youth Literature Award (2008), and the Pacific Northwest Book Award (2008). It was also named a Notable Children's Book by the *New York Times* (2007) and a Favorite Children's Book by the *Los Angeles Times* (2007). *USA Today* said the book is "sure to resonate and lift spirits of all ages for years to come," and *Booklist* praised the novel's ability to help teens, noting that "younger teens looking for the strength to lift themselves out of rough situations would do well to start here."

Complaints about profanity and references to sex focus on decontextualized passages and ignore the value of the work as a whole. These "objectionable" decontextualized passages provide no justification for removing a valuable work from the curriculum. Otherwise, great works of literature like *The Catcher in the Rye* (profanity) and *Brave New World* (sex) would have no place in our classrooms and libraries. Schools that fail to teach literary works of this magnitude would considerably disadvantage their students.

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

Cancelling lessons on *Part-Time Indian* because some parents believe it conflicts with their “traditional family values” ignores the diversity of opinion within the community and prioritizes the values of the few families who are complaining about the book over those of the many families who are not. Complainants have every right to prevent their children from reading books that undermine their “traditional family values.” To this end, the District has offered an alternative assignment. However, these parents have no right to impose their values on other families and prevent other children from reading *Part-Time Indian*.

Furthermore, schools violate First Amendment principles when they remove pedagogically valuable books due to personal objections about content. As courts have observed, no parent has the right “to tell a public school what his or her child will or will not be taught.” *Blau v. Fort Thomas Public School District, et al.*, 401 F.3d 381, 395 (6th Cir. 2005). 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 (or the language) contained therein. See, e.g., *Pratt v. Independent School District No. 831* 670 F.2d 771, 779 (8th Cir., 1982). The Ninth Circuit has 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).

On a more practical level, removing the book in response to a few complaints may set a harmful precedent that could incentivize future complaints, as potential complainants would realize that a challenge based on decontextualized scenes could justify purging disfavored books from the curriculum. This could also lead to self-censorship among teachers and librarians, who might select books devoid of thought-provoking content in order to avoid challenges. The losers here, of course, will be the students.

Removal of the *Part-Time Indian* from the curriculum may also undermine the aims of Policy 7000, which recommends that school officials consider the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) *Freedom to Read* principles when evaluating complaints. This document observes how “many contemporary novels for adolescents focus on the real world of young people—drugs premarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, high school gangs, school dropouts, racism, violence, and sensuality” and are thus the targets of challenges. NCTE stresses that “English teachers willing to defend the classics and modern literature must be prepared to give equally spirited defense to serious and worthwhile adolescent novels” such as *Part-Time Indian*. We hope you will keep NCTE’s advice in mind when reviewing the novel.

Finally, we would like to suggest that the District revisit Policy 7000. Review policies in schools across the country usually mandate that complaints be adjudicated not by a single principal or superintendent but by a committee consisting of educators and community members. These committees ensure that the educational expertise of the teachers and librarians who selected the books is carefully considered. They also reduce the appearance of arbitrary decision-making. We respectfully encourage you and other District officials to consider creating such a policy and would be happy to offer our expertise and experience in this matter.

Please let us know whether we can be of any additional assistance.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



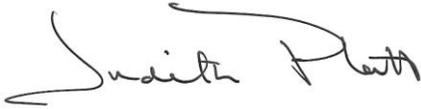
Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



Millie Davis, Director
Intellectual Freedom Center
National Council of Teachers of English



Chris Finan, Executive Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Judith Platt, Director
Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
Authors Guild