

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

Principal Bryan Dolfi
Stone Lakes Elementary School
15200 Stoneybrook Blvd.
Orlando, FL 32828

By electronic mail: bryan.dolfi@ocps.net

May 22, 2017

Dear Principal Dolfi,

As organizations devoted to protecting the right of young people to express themselves and access information, we write to raise some serious concerns about the decision to ban Jay Asher's popular novel *13 Reasons Why* from the campus of Stone Lakes Elementary School. The decision to forbid students from bringing copies of this book to school for personal use may violate the First Amendment as pertaining to the rights of students on school grounds. A district policy banning any book labeled "mature teen" from elementary school campuses in Orange County is also highly problematic. We respectfully urge you to reverse this policy and the ban on *13 Reasons Why*.

Based on information in local media, our understanding is that in April you informed parents (via email) that *13 Reasons Why* was banned from campus due to its "somewhat graphic nature [and] frequent use of profanity, alcohol, and sexually explicit material." A district spokesperson later stated that books labeled "mature teen" are, in general, banned from elementary school campuses. Both bans prevent students from bringing their personal books to school.

School officials may have valid reasons to believe that *13 Reasons Why* and other "mature teen" books are unsuitable for elementary-school students. They may therefore decline to recommend the novel to students or to purchase copies for use in classrooms and libraries. However, they may not forbid students from bringing the book to school or reading it in their free time. Only parents may do so.

The fact that school officials believe a book's content is too mature for elementary-school students is no justification for infringing upon students' First Amendment right to receive and possess literature unless the books in question are likely to cause the disruption of school activities. See *Tinker v. Des Moines* 393 U.S. 503 (1969). There is no evidence that bringing *13 Reasons Why* would in any way disrupt the educational process. Indeed, the ban has been justified solely on the grounds that the book contains allegedly inappropriate content.

As an additional matter, and aside from our concern over what books students choose to carry with them, we note our objection to the District's reliance on the "mature teen" label to create policy. The

use of this label creates a harmful one-size-fits-all policy for young readers. Not all books are rated, and many books are recommended for different age groups by different organizations, publishers and professional publications. Some “mature teen” books will, in fact, be suitable for younger readers. Educators who are familiar with the reading and developmental level of individual students and well as with the books in question are best suited to make decisions about what books to include in the curriculum. As to books students bring into school and read outside the classroom, a ban based on a purely informational label violates both the rights of the students to access material and the right of parents to supervise their children’s extracurricular reading. For more on the reasons why industry ratings should not be used in an educational context, please see <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/rating-books>.

We hope you will allow students to bring *13 Reasons Why* and other books labeled “mature teen” to elementary school campuses. Please let us know if we can be of any additional help in this matter.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship



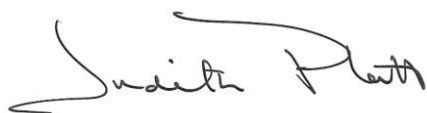
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Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
Authors Guild