

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

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May 8, 2017

Superintendent Rick Brooks
Vinton County Local Schools
307 West High Street
McArthur, OH 45651

By electronic mail: rick.brooks@vinton.k12.oh.us

Dear Superintendent Brooks,

On behalf of the Kids' Right to Read Project, an initiative of the National Coalition Against Censorship that seeks to defend students' access to literature, we write to raise some serious concerns about the removal of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* from a tenth-grade English classroom after a complaint about its use of supposedly "foul" language. It appears that the school district lacks clear written policies for selecting educational materials and responding to challenges to such materials. We urge you to adopt policies in order to allow for a constitutionally sound and pedagogically informed handling of this situation and any future challenges to curricular or library materials. We also strongly suggest that you restore the book to the curriculum while it is being reviewed so that students can finish reading it.

It is our understanding that *Eleanor and Park* was removed from a tenth-grade English classroom well after students had started reading it in class. A parent reportedly created a Facebook post that contained an out-of-context screenshot of a passage from the novel that contained "foul language." The parent subsequently complained about the book to school administrators. Apparently in response to this complaint, administrators instructed the tenth-grade teacher to cancel lessons on *Eleanor and Park*. Students are now being taught a different novel.

Eleanor and Park is a **critically acclaimed and widely taught novel** that deftly explores themes such as love, race, bullying, body image, and abuse. It has won prestigious awards such as Goodreads Choice Award for Best Young Adult Book of the Year and Amazon's Teen Book of the Year. It was a runner-up for the American Library Association's Michael L. Printz Award, given annually to the best book for teens, and is recommended by its publisher for teenagers. Banning it from the curriculum does a disservice to the Vinton County Local Schools' students by depriving them of the opportunity to read and discuss this celebrated novel under the guidance of a qualified teacher.

High school students value *Eleanor and Park* highly. In letters to Ms. Rowell, one teenager noted how Eleanor "is a strong role model for girls who are going through body-image issues, like I did," and another praised the book for making her "reevaluate my life and ways I could get help." Yet another

student described it as “the first book that got me into reading” (NCAC archives). Students in Vinton County similarly appreciate the book and have reportedly created a petition calling for the resumption of lessons.

The presence of “foul language” provides no justification for removing an educationally valuable work from the curriculum. Countless great works of literature such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *As I Lay Dying* use language some may call “foul” and consider objectionable. These books nevertheless remain in the curriculum and encourage critical thinking, the development of language skills, and the exploration of unfamiliar social and historical circumstances.

Removing *Eleanor and Park* from the curriculum due to one parent’s complaint ignores **the diversity of opinion within the community** and prioritizes the opinion of a single parent over those of the parents and students who want *Eleanor and Park* to be taught. Schools **violate First Amendment principles** when they arbitrarily 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).

The hasty removal of *Eleanor and Park* from the classroom after a single complaint **sets a harmful precedent** that may incentivize further complaints; parents are now aware that a single complaint based on a single decontextualized passage may suffice to disrupt lessons and wreak havoc on the curriculum. It thus highlights the need for Vinton County Public Schools to adopt a **formal written policy for responding to challenges to curricular and library materials**.¹ A publicly available policy is necessary in order for school officials to fairly consider and adjudicate such challenges as affirmed by the fact that the overwhelming majority of school districts across the country have such clear policies.

The absence of policy renders curricular decisions susceptible to administrative bias and public pressure. Because school officials are not bound to follow specific procedures, they can essentially make up the rules as they go, thus preventing challenged works from receiving due consideration. An official who is biased against the book can instantly remove it, and an official biased in favor of the book may ignore reasonable complaints. In the absence of formal policy, these officials are also more susceptible to public pressure.

Review policies usually mandate that a committee consisting of educators and community members read challenged works, discuss their educational value, and issue a recommendation to school officials. These committees ensure that the educational expertise of the teachers and librarians who selected the books is carefully considered by reviewers. A sound policy benefits students by minimizing disruptions to lessons and ensuring that their curricular and library materials can only be removed after the judgment of their educators is taken into account.

¹ There is no policy available online at <http://ww2.vinton.k12.oh.us/dist/boardpol/index.php>. If such a policy does exist, it must be made public in the interest of basic fairness and transparency.

We would be happy to assist you in drafting such a policy. We have considerable experience and expertise in this area. In the meantime, we hope you reconsider your decision to pull *Eleanor and Park* from students' hands and allow them to complete the book this school term. Please let us know whether we can be of any help.

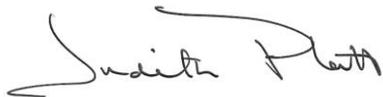
Sincerely,



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