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Open Letter to the Conejo Valley Unified School District Board of Education (CVUSD)

June 22, 2017

Mike Dunn
Board of Education, President
Conejo Valley Unified School District
1400 E. Janss Rd.
Thousand Oaks, CA 91362

Dear Mr. Dunn and Members of the CVUSD Board of Education:

We are a coalition of organizations devoted to promoting the freedom to read and the application of First Amendment principles in public institutions, like Conejo Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) schools.

We write to express our concern over the Board's delayed action on the English/Language Arts Articulation Committee's proposal to include Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the 9th grade core literature curriculum, apparently in response to a board trustee's objection to some of the language used in the book. **We urge you to consider the ELA's proposal at the next general meeting on June 27th, so that there is time to include the book in the 2017-2018 term curriculum.** In making your decision, we hope you will consider the book's pedagogical and literary merits.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is a widely acclaimed novel: it received the National Book Award for Young People's Literature (2007), the American Indian Library Association American Indian Youth Literature Award (2008), the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book Award (2008), and was named Favorite Children's Book by the Los Angeles Times (2007). The School Library Journal named *Part-Time Indian* one of the best books of the year and remarked that "(c)ensored or not, Alexie's work conjures strong response, often a key ingredient in opening lessons geared toward critical thinking."

The California Department of Education (DOE) recommends the book as a "realistic, bittersweet, and humorous novel (that) highlights the challenges young native people experience as they learn to balance Indian life in a modern world." Despite some of the book's strong language, the DOE still recommends *Part-Time Indian* for grades 6-12, lauding the book's exploration of "the complexities

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of coming of age, bigotry, bullies, loyalty to family, and the meaning of love.”

That *Part-Time Indian* contains strong language does not discount its pedagogical value as whole. Otherwise, classic works like *Julius Caesar*, *The Lord of the Flies*, and *Brave New World* – all of which are widely taught and Board-approved for the CVUSD core literature curriculum – would have no place in classrooms and libraries because of their respective inclusion of profanity and sexual references.

As the DOE notes “any piece of literature or nonfiction is potentially objectionable to someone for some reason.” *California DOE District Selection Policies*. Indeed, every community is home to differences of opinion: for each individual who objects to a particular book, there will be others who favor it. It is thus incumbent on school officials to recognize the rights of students whose parents do not object to these books. See *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* (9th Cir. 1998). Parental objections should be carefully considered, weighing the pedagogical merit of the material and taking into account input from teachers.

This principle also applies to the recent informal requests that other books be removed from the Westlake High School core literature curriculum because of some sexual references. These books include David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Pursuant to CVUSD Administrative Regulations (AR 1312.2) and the recently amended Controversial Issues policy (BP 6144), parents “are encouraged to discuss any concerns regarding instructional materials with their child’s teacher and/or the school principal,” appealing to the Superintendent, Review Committee, and finally to the Governing Board, “if the situation remains unresolved.” We strongly urge you to follow this established procedure in handling any requests for the removal of books from the curriculum.

We hope that you include discussion of the proposed core literature curriculum on the **June 27th general meeting agenda** and that you uphold the recommendations of the ELA, Core Literature Committee, and Curriculum Advisory Council. Regarding the other requests for removal of books from the curriculum, we strongly urge you to follow established district policy. If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
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