



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

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American Booksellers for Free Expression
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
Association of American Publishers

BY ELECTRONIC MAIL

October 5, 2017

Mike Thomas, Superintendent
Dixie District Public Schools
Cross City, FL 32628

Dear Superintendent Thomas,

As a coalition of organizations dedicated to protecting the right of students to read, we write to urge you to rescind your September 8 directive, which prohibits the school district from purchasing and/or using “instructional materials (textbooks, library books, classroom novels, etc.)” that “contain any profanity, cursing, or inappropriate subject matter...”

The directive – including the Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment exemption – relies on vague and subjective terms that are likely to confuse educators and obstruct curricular goals. Worse still, by presenting a blanket ban on works that may contain profanity as an integral part of their narrative, the order would deprive Dixie District students of access to literary classics that are essential to the school curriculum. By subjecting school materials to a subjective review and banning books based on possible disagreement with the viewpoint expressed in them, the directive also raises serious First Amendment concerns.

We strongly urge you to rescind the September 8 directive and follow the pre-existing procedures for selecting and removing instructional materials.

Excluding material because it may be subjectively considered “inappropriate” and “questionable” potentially affects a wide range of materials that address race, gender, religion, sex, political violence, history, science, politics, the environment, or any other issue on which people may disagree. Books that community members and parents have called inappropriate include *Nickel and Dimed*, by Barbara Ehrenreich, because of its depiction of poverty; *Native Son* by Richard Wright for its depiction of

ghetto life; *A Day No Pigs Will Die* by Robert Newton Peck because of its descriptions of farm life; *The Diary of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank because it is a “real downer”; and a Shel Silverstein poem in *A Light in the Attic* because it “encourages children to break dishes so they won’t have to dry them.” The September 8 directive provides no definition of, or criteria for determining what subject matter is “inappropriate.” This leaves teachers and librarians with no clear guidance and may encourage them to exclude any potentially controversial material from the library or the classroom.

The exception carved out for AP and Dual Enrollment courses similarly invites teachers to make subjective decisions on whether materials meet “community standards” rather than educational criteria. The vague notion of “community standards” offers educators no clear guidance and impermissibly imposes the viewpoints of some community members on *every* student in the District.

Second, by banning every book that may include even a single profanity, the directive promises to gut the curriculum, leaving teachers and students both struggling to fill the gap. *The Lord of the Flies*, for example, by Nobel Prize-winner William Golding, contains explicit language yet was named one of the 100 best English-language novels by Time magazine and even featured on Dixie County High School’s eighth-grade reading list this summer. Other classics, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Slaughterhouse Five*, and *Invisible Man*, all contain explicit language, as do countless other works by widely-celebrated authors like Mark Twain, William Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, and Langston Hughes. The language and situations in any novel must be seen in the context of the entire work and in the context of an author’s vision, total treatment of theme, and portrayal of characters and dialogue. This is also what Florida State and Dixie District education policies require.

Removing books from classrooms and libraries based on subjective dislike of their viewpoint and content, and without legitimate pedagogical reasons, raises serious First Amendment concerns. Supreme Court precedent condemns school officials who remove books “simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to ‘prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.’” *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*, 457 US 853, 872 (1982) (quoting *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. at 319 U. S. 642)

Finally, Florida State and Dixie District education policies already outline clear procedures for the selection and reconsideration of instructional materials, making this directive unnecessary. Indeed the directive appears to contradict the process established by these policies, which establish comprehensive professional review procedures, whereby educators, librarians, parents and school administrators weigh the “appropriateness” of material per the “highest standards of professionalism and historical accuracy.” See, *Ch. 1003.42, Fla. Stat. Ann.; Dixie District Policies 4.012, 4.12 and 4.17.*

We call on you to rescind the September 8 directive and follow established school policies governing instructional materials. This will ensure that Dixie District is true to its founding philosophy, which requires that students are exposed to the “variety of worthwhile experiences” and taught “due respect for different opinions.”

Sincerely,



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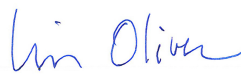
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