

N Kids'
C Right
A to Read
C Project

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February 19, 2018

William Gronseth, Superintendent
Duluth Public Schools
215 N. 1st Avenue East
Duluth, MN 55802

Via Electronic Mail: william.gronseth@isd709.org

Dear Superintendent Gronseth,

As organizations dedicated to protecting the freedom to read, the First Amendment, and high quality public education, we are deeply concerned about the recent removal of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the Duluth Public School curriculum without review or teacher input and in direct violation of District Policies 6035 and 6040.

We strongly urge you to follow district policies by keeping *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn* in Duluth classrooms while convening a review committee, with adequate teacher representation. When considering the suitability of the books, the review committee should base its decision solely on educational merit. Parents who object to their children reading these books can request an alternative assignment.

We understand from press reports that the books were removed in response to complaints over their “uncomfortable” and racially sensitive subject matter. We are aware that in the past, both books have attracted challenges from parents and special interest groups for their depiction of racism in the antebellum South and the use of racial slurs directed at African American characters. The Duluth NAACP supports the removal of these books and argues that because students “deal with (racism) everyday out in the community and in their life,” they should be shielded from the “oppressive language.”

While it is understandable that racial slurs generate discomfort, books like *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have immense educational value precisely because of their continued relevance to modern day discussions of race. Their removal deprives students of the opportunity to critically examine the history of racism in America and racist attitudes they may experience in their communities.

We hope you will carefully consider the following legal and educational reasons for returning these books to the curriculum, pending a review per district policy:

1. Removing books from the curriculum, without review and in response to parental pressures, violates Duluth Public School Policies and raises serious First Amendment concerns.

The unilateral decision by Duluth administrators to remove *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the curriculum contravenes Duluth Public School policies and impermissibly threatens students' First Amendment rights. Policy 6035 on the Selection of Instructional Materials explicitly "recognizes the expertise of the professional staff and the vital need of such staff to be primarily involved in the recommendation of textbooks and instructional materials."

Policy 6040 clearly outlines a three-step procedure for the review of challenged materials, which requires the establishment of a five-person review committee, including teachers. However, we also understand from official statements by the Duluth Federation of Teachers, that teachers were not consulted in this decision.

Moreover, the Supreme Court has affirmed that school officials have broad discretion to direct the use of curricular texts but has cautioned that such discretion be exercised within the parameters of the First Amendment. School officials risk violating students' First Amendment rights when they impose restrictions that are not "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns." *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260, 261 (1988). Bound by these constitutional considerations, Duluth school officials have a duty not to give in to pressure to suppress unpopular or controversial ideas.

In *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District*, the Ninth Circuit rejected one parent's attempt to remove *Huckleberry Finn* from a school curriculum over the same objections raised by the Duluth NAACP. 158 F.3d 1022, 1029 (9th Cir., 1998) ("(A) student's First Amendment rights are infringed when books that have been determined by the school district to have legitimate educational value are removed from a mandatory reading list because of threats of damages, lawsuits, or other forms of retaliation.") The court upheld "students' rights to receive a broad range of information so that they can freely form their own thoughts." *Id* at 1027 n.5. It said the role of educators "is to guide students through the difficult process of becoming educated, to help them learn how to discriminate between good concepts and bad, to benefit from the errors society has made in the past, to improve their minds and characters." *Id* at 1032.

To adhere to Duluth Public School policies and First Amendment principles, we strongly urge the return of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the curriculum and convening a five-member committee to review its educational merits.

2. A pedagogically sound approach to curricular selection requires educational professionals to ask whether a book has educational value.

We strongly urge you to prioritize educational considerations in your review process. Duluth Public School Policy 6035 requires professional staff to adopt instructional materials that “support the goals and objectives of the educational programs” and “foster respect and appreciation for cultural diversity and varied opinion.”

Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* have established educational value, partly as literary classics and partly because they allow students the opportunity to critically examine America’s history of racism. Both books are included on the Library of Congress’ list of “Books That Shaped America” and have been taught in schools throughout the country for many years.

A 1961 Pulitzer Prize Winner, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is lauded for its value in helping students understand the role of racism in American history. In 2007, Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for “help[ing] focus the nation on the turbulent struggle for equality.” Jonna Perrillo, a historian with the National Council for Teachers of English, recently observed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* enriches the exploration of racial inequality classroom discussions, if teachers challenge students to think critically about its resonance with modern day society:

How many teachers encourage students to debate the adequacy of Atticus’s moralism? How can students “walk in another person’s shoes” with schools more racially and economically segregated now than they have been in sixty years? How have the courts and criminal justice system changed and not changed in the eighty years since the novel was set? The book begs these questions precisely because it continues to be taught as a lesson in overcoming prejudice...In missing out on more nuanced and complex conversations, students fail to learn that it is possible to question a book and still value it. And they lose an opportunity to develop a more multifaceted understanding of civic life and their role in it.

[Excerpted from *More Than a Read*, Sept. 25, 2017](#)

Huckleberry Finn is also highly regarded for its multifaceted examination of race. [Common Sense Media](#) describes the Mark Twain classic as “a book that every teen should read,” adding:

There’s a reason why many consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be one of the great -- if not the greatest -- American novel...(It) deals forthrightly, and scathingly, with racism, the great American problem. Those who attempt to ban this book ... can’t see the forest for the trees. They see the liberal use of the “N” word and assume it’s racist, when in fact it’s just the opposite -- it’s a powerful, and powerfully moving,

statement against racism (as well as slavery, war, and a host of other American problems).

Of course, *Huckleberry Finn* presents many challenges to students – not only about the slurs and obvious racial tensions in the book, but their continued resonance with modern day society. As renowned Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin explained, “*Huckleberry Finn* remains a hard book to read and a hard book to teach.... If we lived in a world in which racism had been eliminated generations before, teaching *Huck Finn* would be a piece of cake. Unfortunately that’s not the world we live in.”

Indeed, it is because *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn* are so challenging that they should be read in the classroom, where the questions and ambivalences they raise can be contextualized and examined.

While the use of historically accurate language may be discomfoting to some readers, it is an essential part of any realistic account of history. Educators have a responsibility to teach students to engage with works that may create discomfort in order to glean a more astute understanding not only of history, but also of present day society.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you retain *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in your curriculum. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

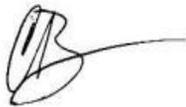
Sincerely,



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