



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

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American Booksellers for Free Expression
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

November 13, 2018

Dr. Rodney Shotwell, Superintendent
Rockingham County School District
511 Harrington Highway
Eden, NC 27288

Dear Dr. Shotwell,

We are an alliance of organizations dedicated to defending young people's First Amendment rights to read and learn free from censorship. We write in response to alarming reports that your district has banned the young adult novel *Beartown* after parents and religious leaders complained about explicit language in the book.

We urge you to honor your constitutional and educational obligations to your students by lifting the district-wide ban of *Beartown* and following district procedures for the selection and review of controversial instructional materials.

We understand that at an October 6 school board meeting, several parents publicly objected on religious and moral grounds to the teaching of *Beartown* – a novel by bestselling author Fredrik Backman, which was recently named to the Association of Illinois School Library Educators' Abraham Lincoln Award 2019 Master List. Shortly thereafter, we understand that your office unilaterally ordered a district-wide ban of the book.

Our public educational system is based on the premise that a free and unfettered exchange of ideas is essential to both democracy and education. The First Amendment protects these principles, and the ability of teachers to choose supplementary materials, like *Beartown*, is integral to the creation of a vibrant and healthy learning environment.

The First Amendment imposes a constitutional obligation on school officials to resist pressure to promote a particular religious belief or suppress controversial or unpopular ideas. Nor may they restrict access to books based on their own preferences or a parent's subjective view of what is "appropriate" in literature. *Island Trees School District v. Pico*, 457 US 853 (1982). Rather, school officials should make educational decisions to advance strictly secular pedagogical objectives.¹

¹ (See also, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260, 261 (1988) restricting administrators' editorial discretion to actions that are "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns" and *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943) ("If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion."))

Beartown tells the story of a small town hockey team whose star player is accused of raping a teenage girl. [Kirkus Review](#) praises *Beartown* for sharing with readers “more than youth sports; it’s part coming-of-age novel, part study of moral failure, and finally a chronicle of groupthink in which an unlikely hero steps forward to save more than one person from self-destruction.” For Rockingham County teens, *Beartown* offers a timely and invaluable opportunity to examine and question the social normalization of sexual violence and do so in the classroom, where trained teachers can help guide them towards meaningful character-building realizations.

We believe every public school should serve as a place where students of diverse perspectives and capacities can engage new ideas. We also recognize that parents are entitled to direct their child’s education. While not everyone will understand or agree with the ideas expressed in challenging texts like *Beartown*, schools should create opportunities for teachers to share the educational benefits of reading it so that each parent can make an informed decision for their child. No parent has the right to decide what others may read.

We strongly urge you to lift your ban against *Beartown* and allow schools to follow district policy in selecting instructional materials.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us if you need additional guidance.

Sincerely,



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National Coalition Against Censorship



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