

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

April 29, 2020

Thomas Berge, President, Board of Education
Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District
501 N Gulkana St.
Palmer, AK 99645

Sent via Electronic Mail to: Thomas.Bergey@matsuk12.us

Dear Mr. Berge,

As organizations dedicated to the freedom to read and the application of First Amendment law in public institutions, we are writing to encourage the school board of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District to reverse its recent decision to remove five renowned works from the district's eleventh grade English reading list. The decision to remove the books is educationally and legally unsound, is disrespectful of the competence of the district's educational professionals, and is poor policy.

It is our understanding that last week, the School Board of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District voted to remove five of the twelve books on the [suggested reading list for the district's English 3 course on American Literature](#) for the sole reason that the district had previously applied a label that the books "may contain controversial content."

The removal of books from a list developed by educational professionals for the sole reason that they may have content that some would find "controversial" is educationally misguided, disrespectful of teachers' educational competence, and legally questionable.

Removing from the curriculum every book that some member of the community might find controversial would leave education in shreds and students at a disadvantage. As one school board member who teaches freshman college English noted at last week's meeting, exposing students to "controversial" ideas is essential to teaching critical thinking skills.

The books removed in Matanuska-Susitna are among the greatest works in the canon of American literature, and have been widely taught in schools, including those in Matanuska-Susitna, for years. In 1998 the Modern Library ranked *Catch-22* as the 7th greatest English-language novel of the 20th Century and *Invisible Man* as the 19th greatest. *The Great Gatsby* was ranked by *Le Monde* as one of the top fifty novels of the century in any language and has been made into a movie at least four times, most recently in 2013. *The Things They Carried* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* have each won numerous awards and have sold millions of copies.

At last week's meeting, Board members who opposed the books stated that they objected only to specific passages in each of the books. Basing a decision to remove a book from the curriculum, as the Matanuska-Susitna board did, on isolated passages is legally questionable. As the Supreme Court recognized [more than sixty years](#) ago, judging a book as a whole rather than by isolated passages is necessary to prevent the gradual erosion of free speech protections.

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
AICA-USA
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
Freedom to Read Foundation
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The NewsGuild-CWA
PEN America
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church,
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

The district's teaching staff is professionally prepared to guide young adults in the study of these books, even if they contain passages some would consider controversial. If not in a classroom, under the guidance of trained educators, where ought students to encounter challenging, complicated ideas? Removing the books is disrespectful of the expertise of the district's professional staff.

Basing curricular decisions on fears of controversy presents the danger of viewpoint discrimination and is, therefore, not only educationally misguided, but also constitutionally suspect. Removing books because some members of the community object - or might object - to their content gives those community members impermissible ideological veto power over the curriculum. Labels like "controversial" are vague and can be used as an excuse to oppose books for the ideas they contain, thereby imposing a particular religious or political viewpoint on the educational system. Curricular decisions must be made for pedagogical reasons.

Alaska [state law](#) permits parents who object to particular books to opt to have their children read an alternative book. That law ensures that individual parental objections - which can vary and affect a very large number of books - do not dictate what every student is permitted to learn.

Therefore, the Board's action establishes a poor policy, which is both educationally and legally suspect, and is also disrespectful of the professional expertise of the District's educators. We call upon the Board to reverse this decision, and to continue to permit its teachers to introduce students to some of the greatest works of American literature.

Warmest regards,



Christopher Finan, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship



Emily Kirkpatrick, Executive Director
National Council of Teachers of English



David Grogan, Executive Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
Authors Guild



Fatima Shaik, Co-Chair
Children's and Young Adult Book Committee
PEN America



Lin Oliver, Executive Director
Society of Children's Book Writers
and Illustrators