

**NATIONAL  
COALITION  
AGAINST  
CENSORSHIP**

**KIDS'  
RIGHT  
TO READ**

A project of the National  
Coalition Against Censorship

**CO-SPONSORED BY**

American Booksellers for Free  
Expression  
Comic Book Legal Defense  
Fund

September 17, 2020

By electronic mail

Board of Education  
Burbank Unified School District  
1900 W. Olive Ave  
Burbank, CA 91506

Re: Proposed removal of *Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and other texts

Dear Board members,

As organizations dedicated to protecting the freedom to read, the First Amendment, and high quality public education, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the groups signed below are deeply concerned by the Burbank Unified School District's response to a recent request to remove several books from the district curriculum. The District has apparently violated its own regulations by instructing teachers to stop using the books while it assesses the merits of the challenge. In addition, we believe that the books, which we understand include *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Cay*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, have great pedagogical value and should be retained in the curriculum.

We have been informed by District officials that they will be following the process outlined in their policy regarding the review of challenges to curriculum. However, we have also been told by a community member that teachers have been instructed to stop using the texts until the challenge has been reviewed.

District policy AR 1312.2 states that challenged texts should ordinarily stay in use while a challenge is pending. The parent who filed the complaint can ask that his/her/their child be excused from using the material in question. Therefore, we call on the District to follow its own policy and instruct teachers that they may continue to use the books in class unless and until the challenges to the books are upheld by the school board.

In addition, we strongly urge the school board to retain the books. At the September 3, 2020, board meeting, the District's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion committee noted that it is considering recommending either that the books be removed, or that teaching of the books be improved. Given the clear value of the books, we urge the District to choose the latter option. While we recognize that they contain offensive racial epithets and other expressions of racism, they are also immensely valuable for students, both as literary works and as powerful statements against racism.

Both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* 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.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not only considered one of the greatest American novels — Ernest Hemingway famously said that “all modern American literature comes from *Huck Finn*” — it is also one of the most powerfully anti-racist works ever written. 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. . . . [Critics] 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 both students and teachers. A renowned Mark Twain scholar, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, acknowledged, “*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.” But curricula have been developed that make it possible to teach the book with sensitivity and compassion.

Finally, *Huckleberry Finn* is not just a profoundly anti-racist book, it also includes a powerful statement against gun violence.

Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* also has been and continues to be taught in many classrooms and is widely read in the United States. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is lauded for its value in helping students understand the role of racism in American history. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, the novel has sold over thirty million copies since its publication in 1960. In 1998, the Library Journal named it the “Best Novel of the Century.” In 2007, Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for “help[ing] focus the nation on the turbulent struggle for equality.”

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* was awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1977. In the novel, Mildred Taylor, herself African-American, tells the story of a Black family fighting to stay together in the face of brutal racist attacks, illness, poverty, and betrayal in the Deep South of the 1930s. In responding to attacks on the book, Taylor argued that the book contained important lessons for young people. In accepting an award from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1998, she said: “As a parent I understand not wanting a child to hear painful words, but as a parent I do not understand not wanting a child to learn about a history that is part of America, a history about a family representing millions of families that are strong and loving who remain united and strong, despite the obstacles they face.”

*The Cay* is an award-winning young adult novel that tells the powerful story of how an 11-year-old boy learns to reject the racist views of his upbringing and to recognize the humanity of those normally deemed the “other” by society.

At a time when hundreds of thousands of Americans are in the streets protesting police brutality and systemic racism, it is more important than ever for educators to teach books that help their students understand the role that race has played in American history and how it continues to shape our society. The parents of students who object to these books have a right to request alternate assignments. But the Burbank schools have an obligation to help the rest of its students understand why the books are so painful and their responsibility for confronting racism. To do so, they must provide teachers with the resources and support they need to teach these books successfully.

Finally, students and parents who object to the use of these books can opt out of reading them. In contrast, students who never get exposed to these classics and to the guided analysis thereof which is provided by the Districts' professional educators can never opt in; most college students never take a course in American literature nor in ethnic studies, and of course many of the District's students never get the opportunity to attend college at all. It is those students, the ones who are most at risk and who are most often left behind, who will suffer the greatest harm if the District completely eliminates these works from the curriculum.

We strongly urge you to return the challenged books to the classroom while the review process is underway and to give serious consideration to their importance as the process moves forward.

Sincerely yours,



Christopher Finan  
Executive Director  
National Coalition Against Censorship

Co-signed by:

American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom  
Authors Guild  
Freedom to Read Foundation  
National Council of Teachers of English  
PEN America Children's and Young Adult Book Committee  
Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

Cc: Armond Aghakhanian, Board President  
Steve Frintner, Board Vice President  
Charlene Tabet, Board Clerk  
Steve Ferguson, Board Member  
Roberta Reynolds, Board Member