

*Written by Chloe Bauer, November 2020*

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, another matter has divided my hometown of Burbank, California in 2020: the removal of important works of literature from the middle and high school curriculum. My name is Chloe Bauer. I first learned of Burbank Unified School District's challenged book situation back in September and [was recently interviewed by the Los Angeles Times](#) regarding this topic.

I'm currently fourteen years old and a freshman at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts. I have a younger sister in middle school in the Burbank USD who loves literature as much as I do, and two years ago, when I was in seventh grade, I read Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* at John Muir Middle School. This novel had a profound impact on me and the way I viewed racism in America. However, Burbank USD has put a stop to the teaching of five novels, including *Roll of Thunder*, in their curriculum, sparking outrage within the community and dividing many people in the education system. I learned of this situation in early September; after sending several emails to district officials and being dismissed, [I spoke to the Board of Education on September 17](#).

But a lot has changed since then.

This is an incredibly difficult and sensitive topic. For my own mind to make sense of it, I've broken it down into two large issues: the way the books are taught and the way the books were removed.

The first big issue with BUSD's pulling of books is the way these books are being taught. I can only speak on behalf of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, as this is the only book on the list I read when I attended John Muir Middle School. The main reasons for pulling *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* are that *the book* "traumatizes" students and depicts racism as an "artifact of the past," as one parent described it. Students of color have reported being harassed, bullied and singled out by other students who called them the n-word and who said that they learned the word was okay to use from *Roll of Thunder*. This most certainly was not the case when my classmates and I were taught this novel; it is extremely disappointing to learn that it *was* the case for other students in different classes in other schools. But, to my understanding, the students who spoke up about such terrible experiences were not traumatized by the books themselves, and were

instead traumatized by how they were treated by teachers and fellow students. This supports my argument that the book itself is not “traumatizing,” that the fault lies in *the way the book was taught*. Another example is that, according to a parent who filed one of the formal complaints, *Roll of Thunder* depicts racism as an “artifact of the past.” Racism may very well have been presented as a thing of the past by a careless teacher, but that is not in any way a lesson that you learn from this book. When I was taught this novel, we had almost daily discussions about how the Logan family’s experiences were still problems that people of color were encountering today. It appears that, unfortunately, this may have not been the case for all students. We need to change the way teachers present these books to their students and have discussions regarding sensitive topics in the novels. This is why I support all teachers teaching these books receiving mandatory “sensitivity training.” This training would (further) educate teachers on how to deal with sensitive topics, such as racism, in the books they teach. It would provide guidance on how to properly lead class discussions regarding certain subjects and the exact discussions teachers *should* be having with their students, such as racism still existing, the absolutely inappropriate usage of the n-word in today’s society, and so on.

The second issue with BUSD’s pulling of books is the way everything has been handled. An informal complaint was made to the district and, before a formal complaint was even issued, Superintendent Matt Hill decided to, effective immediately, stop instruction of these books. The reasons behind this are likely due to a summer of mass protests supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and denouncing the way black people continue to be treated in today’s society. I believe that he, along with the district, panicked. The rushed nature of Hill’s decision goes directly against BUSD’s own policy on issues regarding parent complaints that have to do with literature, which is: “...challenged material may remain in use until a final decision has been reached.” In other words, when a book is challenged, the book should remain in use while the challenge is pending. This policy was not followed. Hill argued that the policy says, “may, not shall.” But keeping books in classrooms during a review process is what all book review policies should require (according to the NCAC). Because of this brash decision to instantly stop instruction of teachers’ curriculums, several teachers have been left with nothing. The district halted the instruction *with absolutely no plan*. Teachers were not given replacement novels and lessons after being told that they would no longer be permitted to teach a core novel to their classes. Teachers should be allowed to continue the instruction of these five novels, and the district should follow their own policy’s steps to ultimately decide whether or not the challenged material will stay in the curriculum. Now, if all of the steps had been followed and the ultimate

decision was that the challenged material should no longer remain in use, I, along with countless others, would have a much easier time accepting it. I'm all for diversifying the curriculum, making more students feel represented and updating the novels we teach/learn. But only if it's done correctly. Whether or not you agree with *Roll of Thunder* being an anti-racist novel that should be kept in the curriculum, we can all agree that the way BUSD handled and is continuing to handle this issue is downright wrong.

What I would like to see happen in the future is this: all teachers with any of the five challenged books in their curriculum should receive mandatory "sensitivity training," and the whole review process should be re-done, with more time for thoughtful reflection and without rushed decisions.