

**NATIONAL
COALITION
AGAINST
CENSORSHIP** **KIDS'
RIGHT
TO READ**

May 26, 2021

Board of Education
Columbus County Schools
817 Washington St.
Whiteville, NC 28472

Re: *One of a Kind, Like Me*

Dear Board members:

The National Coalition Against Censorship is a coalition of national nonprofit groups dedicated to protecting the First Amendment rights of K-12 students, teachers, and staff. We are writing in regard to recent media reports regarding the treatment of Laurin Mayeno's book, *One of a Kind, Like Me*. We have concerns about district policies on supplemental materials, the application of those policies in this case, and possible First Amendment repercussions.

One of a Kind, Like Me tells the story of a boy who decides to dress as a princess for a school costume parade, and his efforts to find an appropriate costume. According to media reports, students from a local university's education department performed the book's story to elementary school children via video. Some parents, possibly associating the content of the book with current political debates over transgender identity, complained to district officials. In response, Superintendent Meadows apologized for not ensuring that the book was vetted before being performed, and a school board member was quoted as saying that the district does not consider matters of "gender identity politics" to be appropriate for the district's elementary school classrooms.

Claims that certain books are "inappropriate" often serve as a mask for hostility towards the viewpoint expressed by those books, which raises grave First Amendment concerns. For that reason, determinations of appropriateness should be based on accessibility (such as lexile level or comprehension level), rather than on inferences by parents or administrators about what they imagine the book might be implying. Such inferences can often be colored by the political views of complainants. The complaint about *One of a Kind, Like Me* is a case in point. The book is a reaffirmation of the importance and dignity of each individual. Its lesson appears on the last page, in which the characters state that each of them, whether dressed as an octopus, a butterfly, or a princess, is "one of a kind." Hence, the book teaches tolerance of individual choices, and it does not advocate that anyone make any particular choice. By declaring the book inappropriate because it touches on issues that adults see as related to gender identity,

the district is imposing its own view of what are acceptable forms of difference among individuals. Determinations of “appropriateness” must always be grounded in educational reasoning, made without viewpoint bias.

In addition, the claim that the district requires vetting of all supplemental material is incorrect. Board policy does not require all supplemental materials to be vetted, but instead states: “Principals shall establish rules concerning what materials may be brought in by teachers without review.” The misrepresentation of policy by district officials suggests that their concern was not for process so much as their perception of the book’s viewpoint.

Finally, the public comments by district officials appear to ban the use of *One of a Kind, Like Me* in district classrooms. Such a ban violates the district’s own procedures for adjudicating parental challenges to classroom materials, which are set forth at length in Board Administrative Regulation 3210-R, and which are designed in part to prevent viewpoint discrimination from affecting decisions about instructional materials.

NCAC calls upon the District to publicly clarify that teachers may use supplemental materials without vetting if doing so complies with their specific school’s policies for such use. Further, we call upon the district to take no action regarding the use of *One of a Kind Like Me* unless a formal challenge is filed, as required by district policies. If such a challenge is filed, we expect the district to follow those procedures in their entirety.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely yours,



Christopher Finan
Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

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