



# KIDS' RIGHT TO READ

October 20, 2021

Board Members

Virginia Beach City Public Schools  
2512 George Mason Dr.  
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

Re: Challenge to school library books

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 a news report indicating that several books, including such award-winning books as *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines, *The Bluest Eye* by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, and *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, have been removed from school libraries pending the outcome of an official challenge to their inclusion on library shelves.

We are concerned about these reports because District Regulation 6-61.2(A)(3) explicitly states: "Material may not be withdrawn from use with other students unless the decision is made to do so after following the process in this regulation." Thus, it appears that the district has ignored its regulations by removing the books from the school libraries.

Removing a book without following administrative regulations is not only illegal, it also raises serious pedagogical concerns. The requirement of a review process for challenged books, both in the classroom and the library, assures teachers that they can choose titles that may be controversial but have important educational value. Without that assurance, they would be reluctant to assign any but the most innocuous and unchallenging books. It would create a chilling effect on their willingness to select the books that they believe best serve students' needs.

Removing books before they have been reviewed also gives the personal opinions of those who challenged them at least a temporary veto over the judgment of the education professionals who selected the books for the library or the classroom.

Thousands of school districts have adopted regulations like yours to give teachers latitude to select books that address pressing social problems. All of the titles at issue here tell stories by and about people of color. All grapple with difficult ideas of identity. All are complex narratives that cannot be reduced to individual passages or scenes taken out of context. And, all help

students to achieve one of the goals of the English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools: To prepare students to “collaborate with diverse groups in their communities, workplace, and postsecondary education.”

Some students in your district may see themselves reflected in these characters and stories in ways that they do not often see in books. Other students may be exposed to lives and experiences they would not otherwise encounter, challenging them to develop empathy, critical thinking and a respect for difference. Some students may dismiss the books entirely. But it is crucial that all students be allowed to access as wide a variety of books, voices and ideas as possible, even and perhaps especially ones that challenge them.

Therefore, we ask that the District return the books to the library shelves until the challenge has been adjudicated, and to clarify to all teachers, administrators and staff that administrative regulations must be followed when challenges are brought to curricular materials.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely yours,



Christopher Finan  
Executive Director  
National Coalition Against Censorship

Co-signed by: The Authors Guild  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
National Council of Teachers of English  
PEN America  
PEN Children's and Young Adult Books Committee  
Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

CC: Dr. Aaron C. Spence, Superintendent

A project of the National  
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