

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

November 17, 2021

Board of Education Members
Orange County Public Schools
445 W. Amelia St.
Orlando, FL 32801

Re: Book Challenge Procedures / *Gender Queer*

Dear Board Members:

The National Coalition Against Censorship is an alliance of national nonprofit groups dedicated to protecting freedom of expression, including the rights of K-12 students, teachers, and staff. We are writing in regard to the District's recent removal of *Gender Queer* from school library shelves.

It is our understanding that the District did not follow its book challenge procedures regarding *Gender Queer* because, in the District's view, those procedures did not apply, perhaps because a complaint about the book was brought directly to the Board, rather than being filed at the school level, as is the norm.

We are writing to urge you to amend the District's procedures to ensure that all challenges are addressed pursuant to District regulations. Book challenges are often highly contentious and emotional, and the District's regulations are well crafted to ensure that all parties feel that they have been heard and respected, and also to ensure that decisions are made based on objective criteria which focus on the needs of students. For example, the regulations provide that a committee of educational professionals initially review the challenged work; that an appeal of that committee's recommendation be made to a diverse committee of both professionals and laypersons; and that the committee must "consider the educational philosophy of the school district, the professional opinions of other teachers of the same subject and of other competent authorities, reviews of the materials by reputable bodies, the teacher's own stated objectives in using the materials and the objections of the complainant."

By exempting certain challenges from the District's regulations, the District has deprived itself, and its students, of the advantages of this very sound policy. Indeed, the removal of *Gender Queer* demonstrates the pitfalls of exempting certain challenges from the District's regulations. *Gender Queer* will not appeal to every student. But if every library book is required to serve every student, the shelves would be bare. A library, including a school library, is meant to include a broad selection of books that provide value to students. *Gender Queer* clearly has

value for many students, especially “those who identify as nonbinary or asexual as well as for those who know someone who identifies that way and wish to better understand,” as noted by the *School Library Journal*. It was a 2020 American Library Association Alex Award Winner, a 2020 Stonewall — Israel Fishman Non-fiction Award Honor Book. By exempting *Gender Queer* from the standard procedures, the District raises the suspicion that the removal of the book was motivated by hostility to the book’s position on gender nonconformity.

Had the district’s regulations been followed, the District might have decided that, on balance, the needs of its students are best served by retaining *Gender Queer* on library shelves.

Therefore, we urge the District to return *Gender Queer* to the shelves until it amends its policies to ensure that all challenges are resolved pursuant to its adjudication procedures.

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 America Children's and Young Adult Book Committee
Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators

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