

November 9, 2021

Board of Directors
Wissahickon School District
601 Knight Rd.
Ambler, PA 19002

Re: Challenge to *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 response to a challenge to the award-winning graphic novel, *Gender Queer*, by Maia Kobabe.

We are concerned because, at the Board's meeting on October 25, 2021, Superintendent Crisfield stated that the book had been removed from circulation pending the outcome of the challenge despite the fact that, as Dr. Crisfield stated, Board Policy 144 explicitly states that, when a challenge to a book is filed, the book "will remain in circulation until the process is completed." Moreover, Dr. Crisfield stated that the book had been removed in violation of policy because "the outcome [of the review] is pretty obvious."

It was highly problematic for the Superintendent to ignore the rule without discussion, and without a single board member taking issue therewith, because the rule was presumably adopted by the board as a sound policy. Moreover, the Supreme Court had described the rule of law as "a foundation of freedom,"¹ so essential that "it is more important that the applicable rule of law be settled than that it be settled right."² Thus, to ignore the rule merely because it was inconvenient in this particular instance was both improper and an abdication of the district's duty to set a good example for students.

It was also improper for Dr. Crisfield to prejudge the book. The review process in the district is meant to be deliberate and thoughtful. District regulations require challenged books to be assessed according to **all** of the criteria listed in Board Policy 144, and explicitly state that the work "must be examined **as a whole** and not in part[.]" Therefore, Dr. Crisfield's comment was a clear violation of that policy.

¹ *New York State Bd. of Elections v. López Torres*, 552 US 196, 212 (2008) (Kennedy, J., concurring).

² *Burnet v. Coronado Oil & Gas Co.*, 285 US 393, 406 (1932)

Finally, the district's action flies in the face of its ostensible commitment to academic freedom and intellectual inquiry, as well as its commitment to "address[] each student's unique needs" and to "help[] them discover and achieve their full personal, social, and intellectual potential" (Board Policy 101).

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. It was a 2020 American Library Association Alex Award Winner, and also was named a 2020 Stonewall — Israel Fishman Non-fiction Award Honor Book. In addition, it was described by the *School Library Journal* as "a great resource for those who identify as nonbinary or asexual as well as for those who know someone who identifies that way and wish to better understand."

Therefore, we ask that the district return *Gender Queer* to the library shelves until the challenge has been adjudicated, and to take steps to ensure that the challenge is adjudicated in an unbiased manner, and in accordance with district policies.

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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