February 17, 2023

Board of Education
Forest Hills Public Schools
6590 Cascade Rd. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

Dear Members of the Board of Education,

Last week the National Coalition Against Censorship asked you to investigate whether Superintendent Donald Behm ordered the removal of books from school libraries in violation of the district’s reconsideration policy. We included a link to a recording of someone who has been identified as Behm saying the he had instructed Assistant Superintendent Scott Haid to eliminate books with “R-rated” content. “I said go find where they are, pull ‘em out, get rid of ’em….” (The recording is available on the NCAC website.)

We have not received a reply to our letter, which also urges you to identify any books that have been removed and to return them to library shelves pending a formal review. To our knowledge, Behm has not denied that it is his voice on the recording.

Behm did address the censorship issue in a February 16 letter to district parents. “We do not ban books in Forest Hills,” he wrote. “…[S]ome books that have been the subject of controversy among some adults….have been weeded out,” he acknowledged. But he said this had nothing to do with their content. Rather, it was the result of a routine process that removes books that have “not been checked out in years, or in some cases, ever.”

But Behm did not identify the controversial books that he has removed. We are asked to take his word that they were eliminated because they are old, not because he objects to their content.

The suspicion that the books were banned because of their content is strengthened by evidence that administrators have removed other books without submitting them to the reconsideration process. According to two sources, at least 10 titles that are the target of challenges in many places around the country were removed from Forest Hills high schools:

*The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel* by Margaret Atwood

*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews

*My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf

*Nineteen Minutes: A Novel* by Jodi Picoult

*It’s Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris

*Almost Perfect* by Brian Katcher

*Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V.E. Schwab

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

- Actors’ Equity Association
- AICAA-USA
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Association of University Professors
- American Association of University Women
- American Booksellers for Free Expression
- American Civil Liberties Union
- American Ethical Union
- American Federation of Teachers
- American Jewish Committee
- American Library Association
- American Literary Translators Association
- American Society of Journalists & Authors
- Americans United for Separation of Church & State
- Association of American Publishers Authors Guild
- Catholics for Choice
- Children’s Literature Association
- College Art Association
- Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
- The Creative Coalition
- Directors Guild of America
- Dramatists Guild of America
- Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
- Educational Book & Media Association
- First Amendment Lawyers Association
- Free Speech Coalition
- Global Alliance for Behavioral Health
- International Association of Art Critics
- United States (AICA-USA)
- International Literary Association
- Lambda Legal
- Modern Language Association
- National Center for Science Education
- National Communication Association
- National Council for the Social Studies
- National Council of Churches
- National Council of Jewish Women
- National Council of Teachers of English
- National Education Association
- National Youth Rights Association
- The News Guild-CWA
- PFLAG National
- Planned Parenthood Federation of America
- Poets & Writers Project Censored
- SAG-AFTRA
- Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
- Society of Children’s Book Writers & Illustrators
- Student Press Law Center
- Union for Reform Judaism
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- United Church of Christ, Office of Communication
- United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications
- Woodhull Freedom Foundation
- Writers Guild of America, East
- Writers Guild of America, West

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In addition, copies of several other titles have been removed from libraries although they remain available as e-books:

*Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* by Susan Kuklin  
*Looking for Alaska* by John Green  
*Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez

We are told President Kristen Fauson has expressed concern about the way the administrative staff handles book removals and promised that the district is drafting new procedures. We hope you will consult a resource that NCAC has created to help school officials adopt effective review policies, *Responding to Challenges to Instructional and Library Materials*. It is attached. The best policies provide that challenged books will not be removed until they have been reviewed by a reconsideration committee.

In the meantime, it remains imperative that the board investigate the actions of Superintendent Behm and other administrators; that it make public a list of the books that Behm has acknowledged removing, and that it inquire into the removal of the books listed above and any other books removed by the administrative staff.

Above all, the board should ensure that any books that have been removed are returned to library shelves until they are formally reviewed in compliance with the requirements of the district’s reconsideration policy.

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

[signature]

Executive Director

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