

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

# YOUTH FREE EXPRESSION

June 16, 2023

Board of Education  
Santa Barbara Unified School District  
720 Santa Barbara St.  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

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 response to news reports that Andres Serrano's artwork "Immersion (Piss Christ)" was removed from the curriculum of a course at Dos Pueblos High School. We urge you to reconsider that decision.

As we understand it, the district received a student complaint about the use of Serrano's "Piss Christ" in the International Baccalaureate class "Theory of Knowledge." The district then received a letter from counsel for the Thomas More Society, arguing that the image was problematic because "As stated by the 'artist,' its purpose was to blaspheme and thereby trigger a reaction. . . . In other words, the purpose of the image is to be hostile to religion." In response, the district made the decision to remove the image because "the use of the image invokes hurtful responses among many in the community."

The district's response is problematic for two reasons. First, the intent of an artist is irrelevant in deciding whether a piece of art should be included in a particular lesson. . History is full of examples of intentionally hostile speech that can be properly discussed in a high school classroom. Obvious examples include Nazis' use of the swastika, KKK cross burnings and many others.

Secondly, while the board is legitimately concerned with alleviating harms to individual students, it also wisely "believes that students should have opportunities to discuss controversial issues which have political, social or economic significance and which the students are mature enough to investigate and address" (Board Policy 6144). Administrative Regulation 6144 balances those dueling concerns quite effectively by allowing a student to opt out of any controversial lesson.

Therefore, instead of allowing a single student's veto to dictate what all students may learn, the district should follow its own regulations by returning the image to the curriculum, while providing the student with an alternative assignment.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christine Emeran". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christine Emeran  
Youth Free Expression Program Director  
National Coalition Against Censorship