

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

KIDS' RIGHT TO READ

August 10, 2023

Montgomery County Commissioners Court
Montgomery County Memorial Library System
104 I-45 N.
Conroe, TX 77301

Dear Members,

The National Coalition Against Censorship is an alliance of nonprofit groups dedicated to protecting freedom of expression. We are writing to share our concerns about the County's recent decision to restrict access to children's and young adult books in the public libraries.

As we understand it, the Commissioners Court voted to label children's books that "may include explicit or questionable materials" and that such books "will have an age restriction of 18 years of age." Based on comments made during the Court meeting on July 11, we also understand that those books may be moved to the adult section of the library.

Labeling books is problematic because labels are imprecise and potentially prejudicial. Labels influence how readers read and understand texts and can stigmatize the viewpoints and ideas expressed by those books. Labeling can discourage young people from reading books that they might find stimulating or educational and may have a chilling effect on librarians who are likely to avoid purchasing books that might be "red-flagged."

Given those potential problems, the use of labels is inconsistent with your Library System's established Materials Selection Policy which states that the goals of its collection include:

- To fulfill its responsibility in a democratic society by providing each individual with the easiest possible access to informational resources;
- To serve a heterogeneous community of more than 200,000 people who have different cultural, inspirational, informational, and recreational pursuits through building collections of printed and other materials suitable to such a diverse group, within the limitations of budget, space, and availability of materials;
- To provide the means for stimulation and encouragement for children, young people and adults in educating themselves continuously and to promote self-development toward enrichment of their lives

The potential policy to segregate the books in the adult section of the library is similarly ill-advised. In particular, it is contrary to the library's commitment to "providing

each individual with the easiest possible access to informational resources." The County can better address concerns about books by providing community members with more information about the books, including why they have been chosen for library collections.

Moreover, the policy is problematic because it treats seventeen-year-olds the same as seven-year-olds. As recently stated by the US Arkansas District Court, in *Arkansas Library Association v. Crawford County* (Case no. 5:23-CV-05086, July 29, 2023):

This would likely impose an unnecessary and unjustified burden on any older minor's ability to access free library books appropriate to his or her age and reading level. It is also likely that adults browsing the shelves of bookstores and libraries with their minor children would be prohibited from accessing most reading material appropriate for an adult—because the children cannot be near the same material for fear of accessing it. The breadth of this legislation and its restrictions on constitutionally protected speech are therefore unjustified.

Finally, we note that the Commissioners Court passed a motion to "expand the types of books that we are able to purchase for our county libraries, so that the libraries may be more balanced [in the viewpoints of their collections]." We would like to point out that your new children's book policy might conflict with those efforts. In our experience, sometimes people accuse books of being "inappropriate" when their true objection is to the viewpoints expressed in them. Therefore, we encourage you to take steps to ensure that any efforts to vet children's books are done in an objective manner. We have attached a resource which includes policies used by school librarians to accomplish that goal. We hope you find the resource, *Material Review and Policy Guidelines and Examples*, useful.

Please let us know if we can be of any assistance in this matter.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Christopher Finan
Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

Co-signed by: American Booksellers for Free Expression
The Authors Guild
Children's and Young Adult Books Committee, PEN America

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