

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

KIDS' RIGHT TO READ

June 13, 2024

Board of Education
Cameron R-1 School District
423 N. Chestnut
Cameron, MO 64429

Dear 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 community reports that school administrators have reviewed dozens of school library books, some of which resulted in permanent restrictions. We would like to suggest that you could avoid potential controversy and better serve students by revising your procedures for addressing objections to materials.

As we understand it, dozens of books were challenged in your district this year and reviewed by the Superintendent and school administrators. In February, according to board meeting notes, these administrators made the decision to restrict some of these books.¹ Based on community reports, we understand that you may be using this procedure to review new book challenges. Your current policy (IIAC-RI²) lacks a clear process for convening a diverse committee of educators and stakeholders to review book challenges. Instead, the policy allows the superintendent to unilaterally adjudicate all challenges as they see fit. We believe that this process can be improved by implementing a more robust and clear policy. An effective book challenge procedure is in everyone's best interest. It helps ensure that the school administration continues to uphold the rights of its students to free inquiry and free expression, while ensuring that all parties feel that their concerns have been heard and considered by the district.

We understand that the process of determining which materials should be available to students is often emotionally charged. As a result, it is important that districts make decisions about library collections in a transparent manner which ensures that all parties, including educational professionals, students, parents and other members of the school community, feel that their views have been considered and that decisions about educational material are made in an objective, pedagogical, and nonpolitical manner.

¹ Cameron R-I Board of Education *Meeting Minutes February 20, 2024*

<https://www.mywebschooltools.com/schools/Cameron/BoardMeeting/minutes/OFFICIAL%20Minutes%20February%202024%20Regular%20Session%20V2.pdf>

²Board Regulation IIAC-RI: *Instructional Media Centers/School Libraries - Selection And Reconsideration Of Materials.*

NCAC has almost 50 years of experience advising public institutions in developing best practices that address those concerns. We recommend that book review policies include all of the following:

1. Record all complaints in writing using a form which requires complainants to affirm that they have read the entire book and identify the grounds for their objections. A written form helps reviewers identify the controversial elements of the work and increases transparency.
2. Convene a diverse committee of educators and other stakeholders to review the material and recommend a decision to the administration. A diverse committee ensures that all community stakeholders voices are heard and considered.
3. Establish clear and objective review criteria for the committee to follow in making their recommendation. Such criteria helps ensure that such recommendations are made in the best interests of students as opposed to disagreement with the viewpoints expressed in the challenged material.
4. Provide a process by which committee decisions can be appealed to the board.
5. Finally we recommend that the policy states that the challenged materials remain on the shelves pending review. The absence of this provision may encourage the filing of meritless challenges for the sole purpose of limiting students' access to books with unpopular views and force districts to spend enormous amounts of time adjudicating challenges.

We have created a resource to help school officials address the problem of book challenges, *Material Review and Policy Guidelines and Examples*, which includes sample book challenge procedures from school districts across the country. It is attached.

Please let us know if you have any questions or need any further support.

Thank you for your attention and consideration to this matter.

Sincerely,



Christine Emeran
Youth Free Expression Program 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
National Council of Teachers of English
Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

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