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# ALA American Library Association

June 9, 2015

Mrs. Kathleen Curatolo, Chair  
Collier County School Board  
5775 Osceola Trail  
Naples, FL 34109

Dear Mrs. Kathleen Curatolo,

I am writing on behalf of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom to express our concern regarding statements made about the books *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Killing Mr. Griffin*, and *Dreaming in Cuban* in the Collier County School libraries. We have been following the public controversy over these books that an organization, Parents Rock, say contain "highly inappropriate, graphic sexual content" and that their presence in school libraries is "unacceptable."

All four novels are acclaimed works of literature that are frequently taught in high schools. Two books, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, are by Toni Morrison, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature; *Beloved* won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize. *Dreaming in Cuban* is a notable work of Cuban-American literature and was a National Book Award finalist. *Killing Mr. Griffin* is an acclaimed young adult mystery that was nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award and named as a New York Times Best Book for Children.

Like all books in the library, these four titles may not be right for every student in Collier County School District. Not all students will be ready for – or interested in – reading these books. But the library has a responsibility to meet the varied interests, abilities, and maturity levels of all pupils served by school libraries in Collier County. Some pupils will be interested in and mature enough for these books, and those students' rights to access them should not be denied due to the objections of other parents in the district.

School libraries strive to represent a broad range of views in their collections and to meet the needs of everyone in the communities they serve – not just the most vocal, the most powerful, or even the majority. While parents and community members may rightfully voice their concerns and select different materials for themselves and their children, those objecting to particular books should not be given the power to restrict other users' rights of access to the material.

It is vital to preserve open inquiry in the school library. A broad range of materials in the school library can introduce students to the joys of recreational reading, help encourage reluctant readers to improve their skills, and provide a place where students are free to explore classroom subjects and issues that concern them. Preserving the right to access diverse books like *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Killing Mr. Griffin*, and *Dreaming in Cuban* is especially important in the context of independent reading. Independent reading is a vital part of the learning process that allows for choice and exploration beyond the curriculum. By preserving students' freedom to explore diverse ideas, we help them develop into thoughtful citizens who are individuals capable of independent thought.

Moreover, public school officials are required to exercise their powers concerning library materials within the limits imposed by the First Amendment and the Constitution. In *Board of Education v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982), the U.S. Supreme Court held that school officials may not remove books from school library shelves simply because of their disagreement with the views or ideas expressed in the books, stating that "First Amendment rights, applied in light of the special characteristics of the school environment, are available to students." This constitutional duty applies with particular force in the school library, which, unlike the classroom, has "a special role...as a place where students may freely and voluntarily explore diverse topics." *Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board*, 64 F.3d 184, 190 (5th Cir. 1995).

Decisions about selecting reading materials – including removing or restricting students' access to books – should be done pursuant to written selection and reconsideration policies. Such policies and procedures are vital to preserving academic freedom and free inquiry within the school. They establish a framework for registering a complaint and provide for a hearing so that all sides may be heard. Further, they offer important procedural and substantive protections for the student's right to access materials, teachers' and librarians' integrity and professional responsibilities, and the principles of free speech and freedom of information. Most importantly, written selection and reconsideration policies prevent anyone from subjectively blocking all students from access to materials simply because he or she does not like them.

Under the best professional standards, review policies ask the committee members charged with reconsidering a challenged book to set aside their personal beliefs and evaluate the work in light of the objective educational standards outlined in the district's materials selection policy. Passages or parts of the work are not to be considered out of context, and the work's value should be weighed based on the reviewer's evaluation of the work as a whole.

Your existing policies regarding reconsideration of instructional and library materials are effective and essential tools that not only assure a quality educational experience for Collier County students, but also provide protection for your students' constitutional right to obtain access to a broad range of materials and ideas, including material that some may find controversial or objectionable. Adherence to your policies – which require parents who object to materials in their students' library to submit a written petition and participate in a process that provides for a full opportunity for the presentation and review of their concerns – provides both due process and transparency concerning any decision about challenged materials in the library.

Additionally, courts considering whether a school board has acted unconstitutionally in removing a book from the school library have stated that when a school board fails to follow its own policies and procedures for reviewing a challenged book, it raises the presumption that the school board's motivations are unconstitutional. See *Case v. Unified School District No. 233*, 908 F. Supp. 864 (1995). Indeed, courts have upheld the decisions of school boards concerning challenged books when such challenges are handled pursuant to the board's established written policies. See, for example, *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District*, 158 F.3d 1022 (9th Cir. 1998) and *Parker v. Hurley*, 514 F.3d 87 (1st Cir. 2008)

Although we are often tempted to shield students from new ideas, limiting access to books does not protect young people from the complex and challenging world that they are a part of. Rather, it can deprive them of information that is important to their learning and development as individuals. Parents know their children best and should guide their children's reading. If a parent thinks a particular book is not suitable for their child, they should guide their child to other books. They should not, however, be given the power to restrict the reading choices of other students, whose parents may make different choices, especially since each student is free to choose or reject these books, like any book in a library.

We extend our support to the capable librarians and administrators of Collier County School District, who work to select material for the library without shying away from potentially controversial subjects. We strongly urge the school board to reaffirm the importance and value of the freedom to read by retaining *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Killing Mr. Griffin*, and *Dreaming in Cuban* in the Collier County School libraries and following established district policy regarding any complaints or challenges to instructional materials should any parent choose to bring a formal challenge to these books. By doing so, the school district will send a powerful message to students that, in this country, they have the responsibility and the right to think critically about what they read, rather than allowing others to think for them.

Sincerely,



Barbara M. Jones  
Director  
American Library Association  
Office for Intellectual Freedom

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