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ALA American Library Association

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Shanlee McNally
President, Board of Education
Waterloo School District
1516 Washington Street
Waterloo, IA 50702

Dear Members of the Board:

I am writing on behalf of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom to express our deep concern about the recent decision to remove Sherman Alexie's critically praised and award winning novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* from the middle school classrooms in the Waterloo School District in apparent disregard of the district's board-approved reconsideration policy and procedure.

Winner of the National Book Award for Young Adult Literature, and recipient of numerous starred reviews from professional journals, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* as a work of literature, speaks directly to the many issues that concern middle school students. BookPage, a monthly book review publication, states that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* "deftly taps into the human desire to stand out while fitting in."

Decisions about the availability of instructional materials – including removing or restricting students' access to books – should be done according 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, the faculty's 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.

Challenged materials that have been duly selected and approved by the faculty and administration pursuant to policy should not be removed from the classroom, except upon the recommendation of the reconsideration committee or upon formal action of the school board.

Based on the accounts provided by your local newspaper, the *Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier*, it appears that these policies and procedures were not followed or used when the decision was made to remove *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* from middle school classrooms. As a result, the faculty, students, and parents affected by the decision were never given the opportunity for a fair hearing or a review of their concerns. Crucially, it appears that evaluation of the challenged materials was done without reading the book as a whole or referencing the district's policy on academic freedom or the district's materials selection policy. Courts considering whether a school has acted unconstitutionally in removing a book have stated that when a school fails to follow its own policies and procedures for reviewing a challenged book, it raises the presumption that the school's motivations are unconstitutional. See *Case v. Unified School District No. 233*, 908 F. Supp. 864 (1995).

In this case, the complaint of one parent was allowed to restrict academic freedom and the First Amendment right to read. In a school district that enthusiastically promotes, "Global Thinking and Limitless Choices," removing *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* only serves to censor a strong, positive, diverse voice that speaks to students' concerns and contributes to their understanding of the wider society. Books like it serve as windows to the world. Though we may struggle mightily against it, we surely must admit that sexuality, race, and poverty are a part of that world. Great works of literature help students make sense of the world by addressing difficult topics.

Although we are often tempted to shield students for as long as possible from the world's more difficult realities, limiting access to books does not protect young people from the complex and challenging world that confronts them. Rather, it can deprive them of information that is important to their learning and development as individuals. Once a book has been selected and approved by faculty members pursuant to the standards outlined in the district's materials selection policy, any decision on whether to limit a student's access to materials is most appropriately made by a student's parents, who are best equipped to know and understand their child's intellectual and emotional development. But those parents should not be given the power to restrict other students' ability to read and learn from the book. The district should respect and support the judgments of teachers, librarians, and other educators who select instructional materials based on their professional and educational standards in order to serve the needs of all members of your diverse community.

For this reason, we strongly encourage you to "reset the clock," and initiate a reconsideration procedure for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that will provide all parties with a fair opportunity to have their concerns heard and allow for evaluation of the book pursuant to the standards outlined in the district's policies, including its policy on academic freedom. By doing so, you will not only affirm the district's commitment to academic freedom, free inquiry, and First Amendment values, you will also assure your community and teachers that the final resolution of the current controversy will be accomplished without ill motive or sectarian prejudice.

Sincerely,



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



Duncan Stewart
President
Iowa Library Association



Michael Wright
Intellectual Freedom Committee Chair
Iowa Library Association

Mailed to Board Members Shanlee McNally, Mike Young, Sue Flynn, Mike Kindschi, Lyle Schmitt, Andrea Sparks, Angela Weekley, Pam Arndorfer, Michael Coughlin

CC: Dr. Jane Lindaman, Superintendent
Dr. Debbie Lee, Executive Director of K-12 Curriculum