



A project of the **National Coalition Against Censorship**
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Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
Association of American Publishers

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Dr. Steven Miller, Principal
340 Indian Town Road
Clinton, NC 28328

By electronic mail: smiller@clinton.k12.nc.us

Dear Principal Miller:

As organizations dedicated to protecting the freedom to read, the First Amendment, and high quality public education, we urge you to keep *Looking for Alaska* by John Green in the Clinton High School English curriculum. We understand that a parent recently requested the book's removal over its discussion of sex and sexuality. We understand that, per Board Policy 3210, a review committee has been convened to review the book's suitability for the curriculum. In reviewing the merits of *Looking for Alaska*, we hope your review committee will consider the legal and educational points we raise below.

1. Removing a book from the curriculum in response to parental pressures raises serious First Amendment concerns.

The Supreme Court has affirmed that school officials have broad discretion to direct the use of curricular texts but has cautioned that such discretion be exercised within the parameters of the First Amendment. School officials risk violating students' First Amendment rights when they impose restrictions that are not "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns." *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260, 261 (1988).

Were school administrators to remove a book from the curriculum solely because some parents claimed it contradicted their religious, political or moral beliefs, they would be impermissibly allowing the viewpoint of these parents to dominate the public education process. See *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* (9th Cir. 1998) (recognizing the First Amendment right of students to read books selected for their "legitimate educational value" even if offensive to some parents and students), *Pratt v. Independent School Dist. No. 831* (8th Cir. 1982) and *Case v. Unified School Dist. No. 233* (D. Kan. 1995) (First Amendment violated by removing materials because of hostility to content and message.)

2. Rather, a pedagogically sound approach to curricular selection requires educational professionals to ask whether a book has educational value, not whether it is comfortable.

Looking for Alaska is a highly praised and critically acclaimed novel that is also immensely popular with high school age readers. It deals with issues of friendship, self-discovery and loss—issues that many teenagers are dealing with themselves. A *New York Times* best-seller and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist, the book was also awarded the American Library Association’s prestigious Michael L. Printz Award, which is given annually to “the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit.” Green’s novel was chosen because he “writes with intimacy, humor, and insight about a world where intense friendship can lead to devastating loss.” *Kirkus Reviews* called the novel a “gorgeously told tale” that “sings and soars” because of “Green’s mastery of language....”

That *Looking for Alaska* makes references to sexuality or contains sexual themes does not discount its pedagogical value as whole, particularly since it is neither “patently offensive,” “appeal(ing) to the prurient interest,” nor does it “lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).

Every community is home to a diversity of opinions on moral and religious questions. For every parent who objects to an assigned book there will be others who favor it. It is incumbent on school officials to recognize the rights of students whose parents do *not* object to these books. Removing *Looking for Alaska* based on the moral objections of some families over the educational interests of all students would undermine the district’s mission of “providing appropriate educational opportunities that will allow *all* students to achieve at a high level of success and to become productive members of society.”

Sincerely,



Chris Finan, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
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National Council of Teachers of English



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