

**NATIONAL  
COALITION  
AGAINST  
CENSORSHIP** **KIDS'  
RIGHT  
TO READ**

October 30, 2023

School Board  
Cobb County School District  
514 Glover Street  
Marietta, Ga. 30060

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 have nearly 50 years of experience advising public institutions in developing best practices for addressing book challenges. We are writing in regard to the removal of two books from the district's school libraries.

As we understand it, based on media reports, the district has removed Mike Curato's *Flamer* and Jesse Andrews' *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* due to sexual content. Superintendent Chris Ragsdale said at the October board meeting that he will continue to remove materials that he considers "vulgar, sexually explicit, lewd, obscene, or pornographic."<sup>1</sup>

We are concerned with the process through which these books were removed. In our communications with a district spokesperson, we were told that the Superintendent acted pursuant to Board Policy IFBC-R. The policy requires that an initial review be conducted by a school level review committee and appealed to the district level review committee. In this case, the superintendent circumvented the procedure. According to news reports, the superintendent "explained that there is a team of administrators that does the evaluation, with discussion in his executive cabinet. He said he doesn't make a decision without that but 'the buck stops with me. It's my decision.'"<sup>2</sup> He did this despite the fact that the policy does not explicitly provide a role for the superintendent in adjudicating book challenges.

News reports also indicate that the Superintendent may be acting pursuant to Administrative Rule IKBC-R *Material Harmful to Minors Complaint Resolution Process*.<sup>3</sup> If so, then his actions seem to be equally inappropriate because that regulation applies only to books which "taken as a whole, [are] lacking in serious literary, artistic, political,

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<sup>1</sup>Parker, W. (2023, October 19). Cobb school board rejects proposed library book policy. East Cobb News. <https://eastcobbnews.com/cobb-school-board-rejects-proposed-library-book-policy/>

<sup>2</sup> ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Gaunt, R. (2023, October 20). Cobb school board votes to leave authority to remove books with superintendent. Cobb County Courier. <https://cobbcountycourier.com/2023/10/cobb-school-board-votes-to-leave-authority-to-remove-books-with-superintendent/>

or scientific value for minors."<sup>4</sup> Decisions about the educational value of books should only be made with input from teachers, librarians, and similar professionals.

The danger of removing books without properly assessing their value for students is exemplified by a recent incident in Iowa where a broad interpretation of a ban on books with "descriptions or visual depictions of a sex act" led to the removal of important historical works like Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to history, such potentially excluded books may include science, art, and sex education materials.

The Superintendent's actions are particularly problematic because, as you know, the process of determining which materials should be available to students are often emotionally charged. As a result, it is important that districts make decisions about library collections in a 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. Therefore, it is important that the district follow its policies which require that decisions be made by a committee.

Finally, we recommend that you consider revising your book review policies to include the following improvements which are commonly included in book review policies in districts across the country.

1. The policy should specify the makeup of the review committee. Most policies require that the committee include parents, teachers, librarians, students, and community members. A diverse committee ensures that all stakeholders' voices are heard and considered.
2. The policy should establish clear and objective review criteria for the committee to follow in making their recommendation. Such criteria help ensure that such recommendations are made in the best interests of students as opposed to disagreement with the viewpoints expressed in the challenged material.
3. Lastly, 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 attached a resource, *Material Review and Policy Guidelines and Examples*, which elaborates on our recommendations and includes sample policies from districts across the country.

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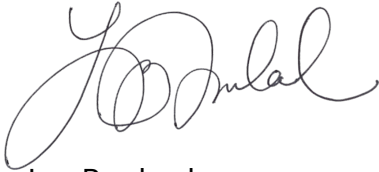
<sup>4</sup> Section I-Instructional Program. [www.cobbk12.org](http://www.cobbk12.org).  
<https://www.cobbk12.org/page/6268/section-i-instructional-program>

<sup>5</sup> Brennan, P. (2023, October 18). Iowa City Community School District releases list of 68 books it's removed (so far) to comply with the new state law. Little Village.  
<https://littlevillagemag.com/iowa-city-school-district-book-removal-list/>

Please let us know if you have any questions or need any further support in this matter; I would be delighted to discuss these recommendations further with you.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



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National Coalition Against Censorship  
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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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