

50 East Huron Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611-2795
USA

Telephone 312 280 4226
Fax 312 280 4227
Toll Free 800 545 2433
E-mail: oif@ala.org
www.ala.org/oif

ALA American Library Association

Office for Intellectual Freedom

August 15, 2017

Mike Dunn, President
Conejo Valley Unified School District
1400 E. Janss Rd.
Thousand Oaks, CA 91362

Dear Mr. Dunn and Conejo Valley USD Board Members:

We are writing on behalf of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, the California Library Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English to express our concern about the recent delay in approving a novel for the secondary curriculum: Sherman Alexie's critically praised and award-winning novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. We understand that delaying the curriculum approval process has essentially eliminated its use for the fall semester. An established and thorough selection process has been initiated by a committee of educators, and we urge the Conejo Valley Unified School District Board Members to approve *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the high school curriculum.

With numerous starred reviews and countless reader acclamations, this book speaks directly to issues high school students actually experience. 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." Books serve as windows to the world, and sexuality, race and poverty are a part of that world. Great works of literature help readers make sense of their lives by addressing difficult topics. Suppressing that literature does nothing to help them, nor does it make the underlying issues go away.

Class discussions of such works of literature give students a forum for grappling emotionally and intellectually with difficult issues under the guidance of a caring and experienced educator. Precluding students from reading literature with challenging themes and language deprives them of the opportunity to acquire empathy, critical thinking skills and knowledge about lives different from their own – essential competencies that are necessary for success in college and in life.

Shielding students from some of the difficult situations, issues and language contained in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* does not protect young people from the challenges that confront them. It ignores the fact that many students are likely encountering similar situations in their own lives. Instead, we should strive to ensure that they have access to the information that is important to their learning and development as individuals, and provide opportunities to discuss such subjects with trusted adults and classmates in a manner that does not trivialize them.

According to the Conejo Valley Unified School District [policies](#), "The Superintendent or designee shall establish a process for curriculum development, selection, and/or adaptation which utilizes the professional expertise of teachers, principals, and district administrators representing various grade levels, disciplines, special programs, and categories of students as appropriate" and "The Governing Board desires that district instructional materials, as a whole, present a broad spectrum of knowledge

and viewpoints, reflect the diversity of our society, and enhance the use of multiple teaching strategies and technologies.”

The Conejo Valley Unified School District utilizes an established procedure of opting out of an assigned material if there is parental concern. The requirement that students submit parental permission slips in order to read and study an approved book may prejudice parents against the book without reading the entire text and create a chilling effect to teaching the material. In *Counts v. Cedarville School District*, 295 F. Supp. 2d 996 (W.D. Ark. 2003), a federal court set aside a school board's requirement that students submit a written parental permission slip to access the *Harry Potter* series. It held that the stigmatizing effect of having to obtain parental permission to check out the books from the school library constituted a restriction on access that violated the students' First Amendment rights, given that the books had been restricted because school board members "dislike[d] the ideas contained in those books."

Every community is home to a variety of opinions on what constitutes an appropriate curriculum for high school students. For every person who objects to an assigned book, there will be others who favor its inclusion in the curriculum. For this reason, the school district should rely upon the professional judgment of its teachers and administrators who have read and studied literature and pedagogy to determine what books best meet the educational mission of the school district and the needs of the students.

In addition, the Conejo Valley Unified School District has a responsibility to represent a broad range of viewpoints in its curriculum that reflects the multiplicity of views, beliefs and opinions in the community and not just the views and beliefs of the most vocal, the most powerful, or even the majority. Students or parents with objections to a particular book may rightfully request an alternative, but those objecting to the book should not be given the power to restrict other students' right to read and learn from it. The school district, as a public educational agency bound by the Constitution, should strive to support academic freedom and students' constitutional right to access a broad range of ideas, opinions and viewpoints as part of their education, including those materials that some may find controversial or objectionable.

In closing, we strongly recommend that the Conejo Valley Unified School District take advantage of the opportunity to reaffirm the importance and value of the freedom to read by approving the recommended curriculum, including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, in the classrooms. By doing so, you 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,



James LaRue
Director
Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association



Millie Davis
Director
Intellectual Freedom Center
National Council of Teachers of
English



Helen McAlary
President
California Library Association