



BOOKS

The White House's demand that Macmillan cease publication of a controversial new book about President Donald Trump and his administration is "flagrantly unconstitutional" and runs afoul of the First Amendment, declared the publisher. Trump had his lawyer send a letter to Henry Holt & Co., demanding that it "cease and desist" publication of *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* by Michael Wolff. This is a longstanding Trump tactic, but it would not stop the publisher, said its chief executive, John Sargent. Reported in *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, January 8.

LIBRARIES

West Chicago, Illinois

This Day in June by Gayle E. Pitman, a children's book featuring illustrations of a gay pride parade, was challenged but retained at the West Chicago Public Library. The mother of a 3-year-old girl, Michaela Jaros, said she was surprised at the content when her daughter found the book. The mother thought it wasn't age-appropriate, and filed a complaint with the library. Her husband, Kurt Jaros, asked the library board if the material could be removed or moved out of the children's section.

Once the incident was reported on the website of the conservative Illinois Family Institute, "The whole thing blew up," Jaros said.

At a library board meeting to discuss the issue, a crowd packed the meeting room and spilled into the hallway. A library official said more than 150 people signed up to speak about the matter, and the vast majority supported keeping the book. After much debate, the board voted 6-1 to keep the book in the library's collection.

"This was a very hot topic," said Maria Dalianis, a West Chicago resident and advocate for keeping the

book as a show of tolerance and diversity. "Our position is you can't address just one segment of the population. It's a book about the gay pride parade. It's pretty darn innocuous. Whatever is in the library, it's the parents' responsibility to monitor their children and decide what's right for them," she said.

Kurt Jaros said his wife would prefer to let her children discover books in the library on their own with her ultimate oversight. "My wife doesn't perceive that she should have to be a helicopter parent," he said. "She feels like the library is not providing a safe place for children to explore children's books."

Jaros is executive director of Defenders Media, an alliance of evangelical ministries that advocates for a Christian worldview. He is also host of a conservative Christian podcast.

"At the very least, this book should be moved to the parental section," Jaros said. "I don't think we see other children's books showing these sorts of images."

The book includes drawings of same-sex couples embracing and holding hands, and Jaros said he believes the book is "ultimately about sexuality."

Library Director Benjamin Weseloh said the book is primarily made up of colorful drawings of a gay pride parade. At the back of the book is a parent's guide that explains terminology and ways to discuss the topic with children.

"This is not sexual in any way," he said. "In my opinion, that's being read into it."

The library has just one copy of the book, which came out in 2014, Weseloh said, but there is suddenly renewed interest in it because of the controversy.

On the website of the publisher, Magination Press, the author is quoted as saying: "When I wrote this

story, I wanted *Pride* to be featured as realistically as possible. I wanted to see drag queens, guys in leather, rainbows, political signs, the Dykes on Bikes—everything you would see at *Pride*. . . . There's something very powerful about allowing something to be portrayed authentically because it teaches children in an indirect way to be as authentic as they can."

Both sides saw the controversy as part of a broader cultural debate over intolerance.

The Illinois Family Institute, a nonprofit Christian group based in Tinley Park, Illinois, wrote an article before the meeting, urging people to attend in opposition to the book, which it called "propaganda" aimed at children.

Self-identified librarians from around the country posted on the group's Facebook site, calling the group "hateful" and "homophobic."

Institute author Laurie Higgins responded by saying the group's critics were trying to bully its members, and that institute members think homosexuality is wrong but abhor violence and hate. Reported in: *Chicago Tribune*, August 30.

SCHOOLS

Conejo Valley, California

One member of Conejo Valley Unified School District's board voted against *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie for the ninth-grade curriculum, but he was alone. Trustee Mike Dunn had no support from his colleagues, so the young-adult novel was approved at a board meeting on August 15, after two months of controversy.

Dunn said he couldn't vote for the book because it was "too controversial. . . . Our children will be hurt by this decision." Prior to the vote, Dunn said there are thousands of books more suitable for ninth-graders.



He asked Trustee Betsy Connolly, who made the motion early on in the meeting to approve the book, “How about you and I get together and find a book that’s not controversial, that’s still stimulating?”

Connolly replied, “That’s not my job. It’s my job that the process is followed carefully and that the curriculum committee consists of diverse teachers. It’s not my job to tell teachers how to teach calculus. It’s not my job to tell teachers what specimens to dissect in class.” Connolly said the board has a role in making sure that correct steps are taken during teachers’ decision-making process. Alexie’s book, based on his life as a Native American boy who leaves his reservation school to attend an all-white campus, was recommended by a team of nearly 50 teachers and curriculum experts in the district. Published 10 years ago, the novel has received the National Book Award, among others, but it’s also on the American Library Association lists of the most challenged books in recent years. Instances of bullying, violence and masturbation are found in the book.

Just hours before the board meeting, a letter was emailed to Dunn urging support for the book from representatives of the American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom, National Council of Teachers of English and California Library Association.

“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,” according to the letter. “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. If we refrain from discussing controversial issues, we’ve failed to prepare our students for the real world.”

The crux of Dunn’s objection with the book lies in the district’s opt-out process.

Jennifer Boone, director of curriculum for the district, said parents must sign the teacher’s syllabus, which lists the books to be read, at the start of the semester. If parents or students have an issue with a book, they are encouraged to discuss it with the teacher and work together in selecting an alternative book.

“Here in Conejo, there’s an opportunity to opt out,” Boone said. “We do offer options.”

According to an informal teacher poll taken over the summer, there have been 12 instances of opting out of a book since 1985. Boone pointed out that not all teachers responded to the poll.

“We have a process to opt out, and it’s worked,” said Interim Superintendent Mark McLaughlin.

But the school board has never received a complaint about the opt-out process, said Trustee Pat Phelps.

Not true, said Dunn. He said he’s received an email about a student who opted out of a book and received a lower grade.

Trustee Sandee Everett also shared secondhand anecdotes about students being embarrassed about opting out or experiencing some kind of repercussion for opting out.

Nearly 30 people addressed the board. Most criticized Dunn, and called on the board to trust the teachers who recommended the book. Supporters of the book included teachers, parents and students. Reported in *Ventura County Star*, August 16.

Rocklin, California

Controversy erupted after a kindergarten student at Rocklin Academy sparked a class discussion about gender issues. The kindergarten teacher at the elementary charter school in the Sacramento area defended her decision to read in class a book related to transgenderism. She says the book was given to her by a transgender child going through a transition.

The book in question is *I Am Jazz*, a story of a transgender child, based on the real-life experience of Jazz Jennings, who has become a spokesperson for transkids everywhere.

The incident happened during the last few days of the 2016-17 school year, and was discussed at a Rocklin Academy Board meeting in August. “I’m so proud of my students. It was never my intent to harm any students, but to help them through a difficult situation,” the teacher said.

Yet many parents objected. “These parents feel betrayed by the school district that they were not notified,” said Karen England with the Capitol Resource Institute. Parents say besides the books, the transgender student at some point during class also changed clothes and revealed her true gender identity.

At a follow-up meeting in September attended by more than 500 people, the board voted to affirm its literature policy. The board also said that going forward it will try to notify parents of any controversial or sensitive topics being discussed in class.

At the earlier board meeting in August, one parent said she wants her daughter “to hear from me as a parent what her gender identity means to her and our family, not from a book that may be controversial.” Another parent said, “My daughter came home crying and shaking, so afraid she could turn into a boy.”



Parent Chelsea McQuistan said, “It’s really about the parents being informed and involved and giving us the choice and rights of what’s being introduced to our kids, and at what age.” One parent said the impact on her son was extremely positive. “It was so precious to see that he had absolutely no prejudice in his body. My child just went in there and listened to the story, and didn’t relate it to anything malicious, or didn’t question his own body,” she said. Many teachers spoke out in support of what transpired inside the classroom. They spoke about the importance of teaching students about diversity and having healthy dialogues.

“When we head in the direction of banned books or book lists, or selective literature that should only be read inside or outside the classroom, I think that’s a very dangerous direction to go,” said 7th grade teacher Kelly Bryson.

In August, the district said the books were age-appropriate and fell within their literature selection policy. Unlike sex education, the topics of gender identity don’t require prior parental notice. Since then, the district has held a number of talks with parents, faith leaders, and other school districts, and administrators offered a series of recommendations that were being discussed. The main recommendations were to affirm the literature policy and to make a change in the parent handbook that would suggest that the school will “endeavor” to notify parents about controversial topics being discussed in class.

“‘Endeavor to notify’ is too loose in my opinion. Who is accountable for that? What will we be notified of? There’s nothing in the proposed policy that guarantees this won’t happen again,” a parent complained.

“It’s impossible to say that every controversial topic the teacher’s going

be able to give a heads up on, that’s just not how classrooms work,” said Elizabeth Ashford, a spokesperson with the Rocklin Academy Schools.

Many parents have wanted to not have their children be placed in the same classroom as transgender children and were asking the board for a chance to opt out. But the district says that is against the law and is discrimination towards a protected class.

Since the incident, at least 14 families have pulled their children from the school. Superintendent Rob-in Stout says she is expecting more people to withdraw. Yet she adds that there are more than 1,000 families on their academy waitlist. Reported in: www.cbsnews.com, August 22; sacramento.cbslocal.com, September 19.

Milton, Florida

Central School, a public school for grades pre-kindergarten through 12 grade that is part of the Santa Rosa County School District in northwest Florida, is resisting a parent’s efforts to ban *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury’s science fiction novel about book burning. (The title refers to the temperature at which paper burns.) Set in the 24th century, the story is about a “fireman” in charge of burning illegally owned books as well as the homes of the lawbreakers.

Sonja McCall-Strehlow, mother of a student at Central School, filed the formal request October 10, challenging the book because of its use of profanity and using God’s name in vain. She also had concerns about sex, drugs, suicide, murder, and abortion in the book. “I’m very disappointed in the whole system,” McCall-Strehlow told *NWF Daily News*. “School is a place where children are supposed to be safe, but the material being read isn’t safe content.” McCall-Strehlow argued that if the students are made to sign a handbook that prohibits the use

of profanity on school grounds, then they should not be reading it in book assignments.

The book, according to the re-evaluation form, was being read by eighth-graders at Central School.

Santa Rosa County Superintendent of Schools Tim Wyrosdick on November 1 sent out a letter in response to McCall-Strehlow’s complaint. He said a District Materials Review Committee was formed to review the book and later submitted a recommendation.

Wyrosdick said the right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied in the Constitution, can be used wisely or foolishly. He added that school district policy encourages students and parents to speak up if they are uncomfortable with material, and allows for alternative assignments.

“I am supporting the decision that *Fahrenheit 451* remain a choice of educational material as part of the core curriculum,” Wyrosdick said.

McCall-Strehlow said she first heard about the book assignment when her 13-year-old daughter asked her what a “bastard” was. “She said that word was in the book and proceeded to tell me what else was in it,” she said. McCall-Strehlow suggested replacing *Fahrenheit 451* with *The Giver*, *When the English Fall*, *Animal Farm*, and *Gathering Blue*. McCall-Strehlow’s second suggestion was to censor some of the language in *Fahrenheit 451*.

McCall-Strehlow said that despite the School District’s assurance her daughter can opt for another assignment, she’s not satisfied. She said her daughter and a handful of other students upset about the novel plan to start a petition to get *Fahrenheit 451* out of Santa Rosa County schools for good. Reported in: nwfdailynews.com, December 1.



Rigby, Idaho

George Orwell's novel *1984* was temporarily removed but returned to classrooms at Rigby High School, part of the Jefferson County Joint School District #252. The novel, with its vision of an all-powerful "Big Brother" government, was being taught in two senior government classes. At least one parent claimed to be shocked by this passage in the book: "He would flog her to death with a rubber truncheon. He would tie her naked to a stake and shoot her full of arrows like Saint Sebastian. He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax."

Students argued that the passage was taken out of context, and was important to Orwell's themes. Senior Natalie Gittens said that if school administrators "understood the novel, they would know why it is important. In this scene, Orwell is trying to show us that power is determined by one's ability to control and degrade someone else." Gittens also pointed out that the attack on the book came one week before Banned Books Week.

Another student's Facebook post about the attempt to ban *1984* drew more than 100 comments from classmates against the censorship. Within a week, an anonymously posted petition against the censorship gained more than 537 signatures, plus 215 comments from people across Idaho, and overseas, and the controversy attracted media attention.

If parents or students objected to the book, the school would offer an alternative assignment, according to Lisa Sherick, superintendent of the Jefferson County School Board. She said teachers would continue to use *1984*. According to Sherick, Rigby High School principal Brian Lords told teachers using the book to pause instruction while administrators reviewed board policy surrounding the issue.

Administrators eventually determined that board policy allows for alternative assignments to be used when objections over content are made. But administrators' clarification to offer an alternative assignment for *1984* didn't reach the classroom, Sherick said, "and books were collected from students." Administrators then told teachers to return the books and resume instruction.

Several Rigby High students told *Idaho News* their teachers made it clear that the book was being banned—and that the district backpedaled once word began to spread. Reported in: idahonews.org, September 22, September 26.

Alton, Illinois

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, written by Sherman Alexie and illustrated by Ellen Forney, has been restored to the 10th grade curriculum at Alton High School. The book had been temporarily suspended a few weeks earlier, pending the decision of a review committee, after one parent simply requested an alternate assignment for their own child. Alton officials have now clarified that teachers have the authority to offer an alternate reading assignment on a per-student basis without triggering a review of the primary assignment.

When the book was banned, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the Kids' Right to Read Project sent a letter of protest to Alton superintendent Mark Cappel. Organizations signing the letter included the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, the Freedom to Read Foundation, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, the Intellectual Freedom Center of the National Council of Teachers of English, American Booksellers for Free Expression, the Association of American Publishers, the Authors Guild,

the Society of Children's Book Writer and Illustrators, and PEN America's Children's and Young Adult Books Committee.

In their letter, they urged that the district keep challenged books available to students until the review process is completed. The Alton School District's challenge policy is not well defined and directs complainants to follow a Uniform Grievance Procedure that is also used for myriad other issues like potential ADA violations, sexual harassment, and bullying. Due to the catch-all nature of this procedure, it does not include safeguards for intellectual freedom in the situation where a book or other material has been challenged. In addition to the confusion over how pending challenges are handled in Alton, a further question was raised when a local newspaper quoted the assistant superintendent of the school district, Kristie Baumgartner, as reporting that the parent who complained about *Absolutely True Diary* "is not asking for the book to be banned/removed." If that is the case, then it is unclear why a review of the book was needed, since the challenge policy already said that any parent can request an alternate assignment for their own child. Reported in: cblfd.org, October 17, October 25.

Annandale, Minnesota

The Annandale Board of Education chose to keep Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the 9th grade curriculum, despite calls from a small group of parents to ban it due to "explicit language." Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and other sponsors of the Kids' Right to Read Project last week sent a letter to the board in defense of the book.

Absolutely True Diary has been assigned to 9th graders at Annandale



High School for the past six years without any issues, since parents or students may choose an alternate reading assignment if they're uncomfortable with the primary one for any reason. The book is frequently challenged in schools around the country for language—including a racial slur used by a bully against the protagonist—as well as mentions of alcohol and drug use. The Annandale board made its decision in October, about a week after the Kids' Right to Read Project sent a letter protesting the censorship attempt. Among the organizations signing the letter were the National Coalition Against Censorship, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Association of American Publishers, American Booksellers for Free Expression, and the Authors Guild. Reported in cdbldf.org, October 11.

Las Vegas, Nevada

Parents objected to explicit language and mature themes in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, when it was assigned to 7th graders at Democracy Prep at Agassi Campus charter school in Las Vegas.

Parent Shateraka Hampton says her 12-year old son asked her to define “masturbate” when he came across the word in Alexie’s book. Hampton took her concerns about the book to the administration, and says she was told the book is part of the curriculum to teach kids about racism.

She complained, “It’s like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* for kids. Naked woman and all this stuff about masturbation, you thought that was appropriate? Not once did you ask us permission to expose our children to his foul language. If you’re just going to discuss the racism and that aspect, then why not pick another

book?” Hampton said. She isn’t the only parent who voiced concerns about the reading material. Karissa Lott, who also has a student at the school, says, “To sit there and say, ‘they’re at that age when they’re going to start being exposed to this’—well, that should be our decision!”

According to Hampton, “If sex education requires some type of permission slip, then this should have required some type of permission slip.”

Democracy Prep Public Schools issued the following statement: “This young adult novel, which received the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature and was named one of the best books of 2007 by the *School Library Journal*, has been a successful and important part of our curriculum, as well as the curriculum of other successful school districts for several years. The novel’s thought-provoking themes include bullying, race, violence, and other issues relevant to young people today. If there are parent concerns, our principal is available to meet, to discuss, and if, appropriate, offer alternative texts.” Reported in newsource.ns.cnn.com, November 17.

PRISONS North Carolina

The North Carolina prison system agreed to remove *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander from its banned book list. Prisoners will now be allowed to read the award-winning book about mass incarceration and discrimination against African-Americans in the justice system. The news came on January 23, amid pressure from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which described the ban as “shameful,” “wrong,” and “unconstitutional.” Chris Brook, legal director of the ACLU of North Carolina, sent a letter

to Jane Gilchrist, an attorney for the state Department of Public Safety, contending that such a ban violates the First Amendment rights of prisoners, as well as the department’s own policies.

New Jersey also reversed a prohibition on *The New Jim Crow* at two prisons. The New Jersey decision came on January 8, hours after the ACLU of New Jersey on Monday sent a letter to the state’s corrections commissioner, Gary M. Lanigan.

However, the book is still banned in Florida prisons. A spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Corrections confirmed that the book had been banned but would not elaborate. A form from the prison system’s literature review committee obtained by the *New York Times* indicates that the book was rejected because it presented a security threat and was filled with what the document called “racial overtures.”

Cornel West, a champion for racial justice, described Alexander’s work in a foreword to her book as the “secular bible for a new social movement in early twenty-first-century America.” West said the book takes its readers beyond such breakthroughs as the election of President Barack Obama, the first black president, “to the systemic breakdown of black and poor communities devastated by mass unemployment, social neglect, economic abandonment, and intense police surveillance. Her subtle analysis shifts our attention from the racial symbol of America’s achievement to the actual substance of America’s shame: the massive use of state power to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of precious poor, black, male (and, increasingly, female) young people in the name of a bogus ‘War on Drugs.’”

Since the book’s publication in 2010, more than a million copies have been sold. Its premise: Decades after



the eradication of Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation in the South, many African Americans continue to face discrimination inside the nation's prisons.

Jerry Higgins, a spokesman for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (DPS), issued a statement announcing the change, a day after Brook sent a letter outlining the ACLU's concerns.

"Upon receipt, the department responded to the ACLU that it would look into the matter," Higgins said. "As of today, the director of Prisons has decided to immediately remove the book titled *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander from the DPS *Disapproved Publications Report*. The director will be reviewing the entire list to determine whether any other books will be removed from the report."

African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons across the country at more than five times the rate of white people, according to a 2016 report by The Sentencing Project, a group that advocates for prison reform.

Alexander recently told the *New York Times*: "Some prison officials are determined to keep the people they lock in cages as ignorant as possible about the racial, social and political forces that have made the United States the most punitive nation on earth. Perhaps they worry the truth might actually set the captives free."

In North Carolina, the ACLU's Brook said, black people make up 52 percent of the state's prison population while representing only 22 percent of the statewide population, according to 2016 U.S. census data.

"Barring *The New Jim Crow* from our state's prisons because it shines a light on a harsh reality confronted every day by Black prisoners in North Carolina is not only indefensible as a matter of constitutional rights,

DPS policy, and logic but also cruelly ironic," Brook stated in his letter to Gilchrist.

Under North Carolina prison regulations, officials can prohibit inmates from receiving publications that threaten the safety of prisoners or staff.

DPS policy lets a facility prohibit an inmate from receiving a publication for a range of reasons that largely fall under the umbrella of disrupting "institutional order, security and safety" and "inmate rehabilitation." Sexually explicit material (*Booty! Pirate Queens Volume 1* is prohibited in N.C. prisons) as well as publications depicting violence (*A Game of Thrones Volume 1*) or insurrection (*The Anti-Government Movement Guidebook*) can be banned. How-to information on manufacturing weapons, drugs, or poisons, disabling communication or security systems, or escaping from confinement may also be grounds for prohibition. Large, hardcover books may also be banned (such as *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*), with an exception made for legal and religious publications.

"No publication or material will be withheld solely on the basis of its appeal to a particular ethnic, racial or religious group. A publication may not be rejected solely because its content is religious, philosophical, political, social or sexual, or because its content is unpopular or repugnant," according to state policy. "Publications that provide unbiased reporting of actual news and events are not normally withheld."

Some of the publications on the list in 2014 and 2015 included *The New York Times Essential Guide to Knowledge*, *Jailhouse Lawyers: Prisoners Defending Prisoners v. the USA* by Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, numerous tattoo books, encyclopedias on a

variety of topics, erotica, and many magazines.

The most recent DPS *Disapproved Publications Report* includes 480 titles prohibited in the past twelve months. Among the more unusual inclusions: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, because it features the rape of a minor; *Prison Ramen*, a book of ramen recipes devised by inmate-cooks that apparently includes instructions on how to stow a razor blade; *Hope—A Memoir of Survival in Cleveland*, written by the two women who in 2013 famously escaped ten years of captivity in a Cleveland man's home; and the May 2017 edition of *Elle Décor* and the October 2017 issue of *O: The Oprah Magazine*, for reasons unknown.

"We appreciate the prompt response and are glad that officials have agreed to review the entire list of banned books, as they should," Brook said. "We will continue to safeguard the First Amendment rights of people incarcerated in North Carolina. Everyone in our state would do well to read *The New Jim Crow* so that together we can work to undo the racial injustice that permeates our criminal justice system."

Yet it is possible the book will be banned again in North Carolina prisons, where it has been banned multiple times. "All you need is one prison to challenge it, and then the book goes back on the list," Katya Roytburd, a volunteer with Prison Books Collective, told the *New York Times*. Her organization is a nonprofit that sends free books to prisoners in North Carolina and Alabama. Under North Carolina prison policy, such bans can last for only a year, but then the book can be banned again. Reported in *newsobserver.com*, January 23; *www.indyweek.com*, January 31; *New York Times*, January 8, January 18.