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ALA American Library Association

Office for Intellectual Freedom

April 25, 2016

Mr. Mike Abell, Principal
Marion County High School
735 East Main Street
Lebanon, KY 40033

Dear Members of the Reconsideration Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom to express our concern about a recent challenge to a novel taught in the senior English class, *Looking for Alaska*. We understand that a parent has initiated a request to remove the book from the school for a variety of reasons including "use of profanity" and "pornography." I write to urge the Marion County High School to retain *Looking for Alaska* in the high school curriculum.

Looking for Alaska is a well-regarded young adult novel. It has won the 2006 Michael L. Printz Award, which recognizes literary excellence in young adult literature as well as the Kentucky Bluegrass Award for grades 9-12. It has also received multiple starred reviews from critics and readers. The novel explores how one young man and his classmates at a boarding school learn how to deal with love, loss, and responsibility for one's choices after a friend and classmate is killed in a car crash. *Horn Book* describes *Looking for Alaska* as "a mature novel, peopled with intelligent characters who talk smart, yet don't always behave that way, and are thus notably complex and realistically portrayed teenagers." The novel's emotionally intense scenes are an attempt to illustrate the struggle with teenage relationships and mental illness - an especially appropriate subject for study in high school literature classes. It deserves its place in the classroom and on the library shelf.

Class discussions of such works of literature – works that address complicated and disturbing themes – 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 one's own – essential competencies that are necessary for success in college and in life.

Although it is tempting to shield students from some of the difficult situations, issues and language contained in *Looking for Alaska*, limiting access to such books does not protect young people from the challenges that confront them and 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.

More importantly, 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.

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 about 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 Marion County Public Schools have 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. And the school district, as a public educational agency bound by the Constitution, should strive to support academic freedom and students' constitutional right to access to 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 Marion County School District take advantage of the opportunity to reaffirm the importance and value of the freedom to read by keeping *Looking for Alaska* in the classrooms and library of the Marion County High School. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James LaRue". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James LaRue
Director
American Library Association
Office for Intellectual Freedom