

An Open Letter to the District Leaders of Round Rock Independent School District:

I read your response to my statement posted on the Intellectual Freedom Blog of the American Library Association.

As Chris Crutcher told me you would, you went right to the censorship playbook just like so many others before you have tried – and failed – in a desperate attempt to suppress the truth. You concocted a ludicrous and laughable false narrative. Instead of acknowledging your lapse in judgment when you had the opportunity to, and instead of taking responsibility for your failure to look out for the best interest of the students of Round Rock, you chose to point an accusatory finger elsewhere. You tried to deflect and distract, and most disturbingly, deny what really happened.

Here's what really happened:

1. At 5:27 P.M. on Friday evening May 27, just before the start of the long holiday weekend, Ami Uselman, the Director of Library & Media Services sent me a four-sentence email informing me my visits to the Round Rock elementary schools in September had been cancelled. After working with the children of Round Rock for every year since the 2007-2008 school year, district leadership took a press-send-and-runaway approach to doing business. It was thoughtless. It was unprofessional. It was cowardly.
2. When I first received the email, I was stunned. The opening line in my email response was:
[Ami...](#)
[Are you cancelling my already scheduled Round Rock visits?](#)
The opening line of my initial text to Ami was:
[I just got your email and sent a response. Did you just cancel all my Round Rock visits for the fall?](#)
3. I addressed Ms. Uselman as Ami because Ami and I are friends. Not just Facebook friends. Real friends. Good friends. Sending-emojis-and-swapping-stories-texting friends. We've been friends for years. She introduced me to Oatmega bars. When I visited Teravista Elementary, where she used to be the librarian, I always came early to hang out with her and do the morning news with the kids. When I had a dental emergency, she got me an appointment with her dentist even though he was halfway out the door heading to Notre Dame for a football game. I rode the bus with Ami (and many RRISD librarians) to the state capitol to march in the Save Our Libraries protest.

Ami and I also shared a dear friend, Lindsay Jones, as in the Lindsay Jones Library at Cactus Ranch Elementary. I sponsor Ami in the annual 'Fight Like a Girl' 5K held annually in Round



Rock in Lindsay's memory. In my new middle grade series, the school is named after Lindsay's daughter and I thank Ami in the acknowledgments.

4. Last year, before she was named Director of Library and Media Services, I visited Cedar Ridge High School, where she was the new librarian. It was one of my favorite school visits of the entire year. I even blogged about it. I urge you to read what I wrote. Read what I said about Ami.

<http://philbildner.com/the-value-of-the-high-school-author-visit/>

Here's what Ami said to me in a Round Rock ISD email about that blog:

LOVED it Phil! I'll be sharing this on my personal FB and Twitter as well as our school Twitter, Principal's Blog and the Cedar Ridge eNews that reaches over 4,000 subscribers weekly!

I felt the same way you did, unsure of exactly how our sessions would go, and how it would be received by the students. But I have to say, I was never worried about it. I knew you would be awesome and you were! On a teacher scale you EXCEED EXPECTATIONS! Thank you for being you! Hugs!

That same blog post was then shared by Carlyn Gray, the Director of Library and Media Services, with all the Round Rock ISD librarians. These are her words in a Round Rock ISD email:

I am sharing your blog with the librarians! Thanks for blogging about our students and our fabulous librarians! We think you are the best!

5. Of course, this clashes with the narrative the district leadership is now putting forth, a narrative they've been stumbling over from the start. In the initial email, I was informed the district had "decided to make other arrangements for the 2016-2017 school year." Then I was informed by the librarian who coordinates my visits each year that "the district is bringing in Ralph Fletcher." Now they're saying something completely different. Round Rock ISD really needs to stick to a story.

Here's how author visits work in Round Rock, and this is something that the librarians know. Author visits to individual elementary schools and district speakers have *nothing* to do with one another. The individual schools coordinate the author visits. The individual schools pay for the author visits. Some use PTA money. Some use book fair money. Some use Title I money. If the librarians weren't afraid to speak out, they would acknowledge this. So would the administrators at each and every one of the Round Rock ISD elementary schools who host author visits.



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6. After cancelling my visits, I informed district leadership that we had a binding agreement, and I expected to be fully compensated. The district responded, cc-ing their general counsel, of course, that if I wanted to be compensated I needed to provide “copies of receipts” and “copies of the correspondence exchanged related to other business you had to “turn away”.”

First, Round Rock ISD misconstrued my email request for full compensation. I wasn’t negotiating. I wasn’t looking for a counteroffer.

Second, once again, anyone associated with hosting an author visit in Round Rock – or anywhere – knows that’s not how this business works. Once I reserved the dates for my Round Rock ISD visit back in December 2015, I didn’t offer those dates to anyone else. They were taken. So the proof Ms. Uselman asked for – and she knows it – does not and would not exist. It was a sleazy, lawyer-driven tactic.

7. Last fall during my visits to Round Rock ISD, all the librarians at the schools I visited knew district administrators were following me from school to school, supervising and monitoring my presentations. All the librarians knew it all started with the book *George*, by Alex Gino. Ms. Uselman and I talked about it a number of times prior to my visit to Cedar Ridge High School on Tuesday October 20.

Two days after my visit to Cedar Ridge, Ami Uselman and all the Round Rock ISD librarians attended their regularly scheduled monthly meeting. Ami Uselman told me all about this meeting in a Round Rock ISD email. At that meeting, Carlyn Gray, booktalked *George* to all the librarians. Here’s what Ami Uselman shared with me – unsolicited – the next day in a Round Rock ISD email:

Happy Friday Phil!

Guess what? Thought you may be interested to know Carlyn was Booktalking George at our meeting yesterday. She recommended it for every middle school library and said it was also great for upper elementary. Your name came up at least three times during the meeting - all very positive as she told the secondary folks how you booktalk along with your writing workshop and she shared your technology recommendation.

8. So Carlyn Gray, the director of Library and Media Services for the entire district booktalked a book and recommended it. Why didn’t the librarians listen to her?

Last fall, I booktalked these books during my visits to Round Rock ISD: *Wonder*, *Out of My Mind*, *The One and Only Ivan*, *Crenshaw*, *El Deafo*, and *George*.



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The following information is taken directly from the RRISD online library catalog. It includes the number of copies available, reading levels, lexile (which I loathe), and Accelerated Reader information (which I loathe even more).

Wonder

258 copies available

Reading Level:

008-012. B.T.S.B.

790. Lexile.

Program Information:

Accelerated Reader MG 4.8 11.0 149900

The One and Only Ivan

98 copies available

Reading Level:

3.6.

3-6.

570 Lexile.

Program Information:

Accelerated Reader AR-ATOS MG 3.6 4.0

Out of My Mind

87 copies available

Reading Level:

010-014. B.T.S.B.

700. Lexile.

S. Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book.

Program Information:

Accelerated Reader MG 4.3 8.0 136421

El Deafo

48 copies available

Reading Level:

420 Lexile.

3.3.

3-6 Follett School Solutions.

Program Information:

Accelerated Reader AR MG 2.7 2.0 168404.

Reading

Crenshaw

102 copies available

Reading Level:

010-014. B.T.S.B.

540. Lexile.

Program Information:

Accelerated Reader MG 3.8 3.0 17656

George

10 copies available, 3 copies available at the elementary schools (Brushy Creek, Deep Wood, Caraway).

Reading Level:

5.2.

4-6.

790 Lexile.

Program Information:

Reading Counts RC 5.2 8.0 66404

Why are there so many copies of all the other books but not *George*? Why didn't the librarians listen to their boss? Why didn't they get the book for the readers at their respective schools?

9. Finally, back in December 2015, we began planning for my 2016-2017 visits to Round Rock. Every year, the same librarian coordinates my visits. Of course, as the person most responsible for bringing me to Round Rock, this librarian was absolutely mortified and embarrassed by what was being done to me. She couldn't believe this was happening in



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Round Rock of all places. She felt the behavior of the powers-that-be in her district had been cowardly.

Still, I wanted to come back to Round Rock. Because it's not about the powers-that-be. It's about the kids. It's always about the kids.

In that very first email on December 7, 2015 as we started to plan for 2016-2017, the librarian stated:

It's good to hear from you! I'm definitely willing to coordinate your visit again next year. I don't know of any reason that Round Rock ISD would object, and if they do, I'm ready to fight. If it's alright with you, I would like to invite all the upper level administrators to come when you visit Caldwell Heights. I want them to meet you and actually see your presentations.

10. Amazingly, none of what I've stated so far even addresses the root of all this. It's time for the district leadership of Round Rock ISD to take responsibility. Answer these questions: How did this all start? Why did this all start? The librarians know. Community members know. It's time for district leadership to acknowledge the truth.



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