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# ALA American Library Association

## Office for Intellectual Freedom

November 7, 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:

I am writing, again, on behalf of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) to express our concern about the [proposed Selection and Evaluation of Instructional Materials policy](#) with an "opt-out" amendment that includes red-flagging (or black-marking) materials that may contain themes that some parents deem controversial. We believe that identifying books as "potentially objectionable" and requiring re-approval of materials can only function as a censor's tool that is intended to prejudice opinion and discourage the use of targeted books. Such "soft censorship" impairs the educational process and denies each student's right to read and learn from complex and challenging texts in preparation for college and career.

Although we support a parent's active participation in their student's education, OIF does not support the restricting or labeling of books based on their content. What one parent views as "adult" or "objectionable" material may be deemed acceptable and even vital information for youth by another parent. To prejudice parents, students, and the public against certain titles by labeling them as "objectionable" or requiring additional warnings impairs academic freedom. These acts can violate students' First Amendment rights if they're used to restrict students' access to books.

OIF only recommends the implementation of an "opt-out" policy on the rare occasions a single parent requests to have accommodations made for their child. For many school districts, curriculum opt-outs, within reasonable limits and with a credible reason, benefit both educators and parents. These policies should be crafted in such a way to respect a family's values without impeding the education of other students, maligning the professional expertise of the faculty, or the stability and proficiency of the classroom.

Education isn't the private right of parents. It's for students, and for the public good. Shielding students from information or discussion that conflicts with one parent's view of the world is not in the interest of the individual student, who is best served by an education presenting a broad spectrum of knowledge and viewpoints that reflect society's diversity. Nor is it in the public's interest, which looks to public schools to develop a well-educated citizenry. While California law allows for parental opt-outs regarding HIV/AIDS

awareness, sexual education and surveys, it does not require that public school districts accommodate unreasonable, "parental choice" demands.


School district policies offer important procedural and substantive protections for the student's right to access materials, the faculty's academic integrity and professional responsibilities, and the principles of free speech and freedom of information. Your district's attempt to adopt an "opt-out" policy is commendable, but we urge you to craft a transparent and manageable policy that allows your teachers to do their job without falling into educational chaos.

Policies should require teachers to provide access to all the materials being taught to their students without singling out titles based on issues that might possibly upset someone. Policies should identify acceptable reasons for asking for alternative assignments and communicate the school's expectations of students opting out of the regularly assigned materials. The alternative assignments should be the same for all students and hold to the same standards as the original assignment. Alternative assignments and the process for implementation should not be based on the issue of concern but rather the lesson being taught. The primary goal is to enable education, to craft a comprehensive and challenging curriculum, not to submit on demand to timorous sensibilities.

The Office for Intellectual Freedom extends its support to the capable teachers and administrators of the Conejo Valley Unified School District, who work to select material for the curriculum without shying away from potentially controversial subjects. Their efforts fully conform to the California Teachers' Association Code of Ethics, which states that teachers "shall not unreasonably deny the student access to varying points of view," and "shall not deliberately suppress or distort subject matter relevant to the student's progress."

We respectfully ask that you reject the proposed policy amendment and work closely with the passionate English teachers of the Conejo Valley district to craft a policy that meets professional instructional standards and ensures a quality education for all your students. We encourage you to respect and support the judgment of your professional educators in their selection of material for the English curriculum based on professional expertise and educational standards, as well as respect and support your students' constitutional right to obtain access to a broad range of materials and ideas, including material that some may find controversial or objectionable.

Sincerely,



James LaRue  
Director  
American Library Association  
Office for Intellectual Freedom