November 19, 2020

Dr. Matt Hill
Superintendent
Burbank Unified School District
1900 W. Olive Avenue
Burbank, CA 91506

Dear Dr. Hill:

I am writing on behalf of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom to address the proposal to remove five books from the curriculum of the Burbank Unified School District, including *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, and Newbery Award winner *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor.

We understand that these works of literature are imperfect and do not represent all perspectives, especially those of persons of color. Each book is a single story that reflects the views, experiences, and ideas of one particular author and thus is not able to offer a complete or accurate portrayal of all the complex nuances of race and class. Nonetheless, they are well-reviewed and award-winning classics of literature whose condemnations of racism, inequality, and injustice have endured through the years.

Enduring works of literature help readers make sense of the world by grappling with difficult topics. Suppressing that literature, shielding students from some of the difficult situations, issues and language contained in these books, does not protect young people from the challenges that confront them. Nor does it make the underlying issues go away. Precluding students from reading literature with difficult themes and language in the classroom deprives them of the opportunity to acquire empathy, critical thinking skills and knowledge about different cultures that are necessary for success in life and in higher education.

Ideally, class discussions of such works of literature give students a forum for grappling emotionally and intellectually with difficult issues presented in those works under the guidance of a caring and experienced educator. Providing opportunities to discuss important such subjects with trusted adults and classmates in a manner that does not trivialize them is essential for students’ intellectual and emotional development.

It is for this reason we strongly encourage you to retain the five challenged novels in the curriculum while improving their instruction in the classroom, as suggested by the district’s Equity, Diversity and Inclusion committee. At the same time, we also strongly encourage the addition of new books on the
themes addressed in *To Kill A Mockingbird, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Of Mice and Men, The Cay,* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* with an emphasis on works written by Black authors and persons of color.

We deeply empathize with those students who have been the target of racist bullying and harassment in Burbank’s schools. Such behavior should be condemned and never tolerated, and we urge that the district do all that is in its power to end such bullying and to provide aid and support to the victims of such harassment. But we respectfully suggest that rather than removal of these books from the curriculum, the actual need is for improved teaching and discussion of these works of literature that places their use of racial epithets in context and highlights the harms of racist actions both in the past and in current society.

In addition, the district should respect and support the judgments of educators in their selection of material for the English curriculum based on professional expertise and educational standards, as well as students’ constitutional right to obtain access to a broad range of materials and ideas, including material that some find controversial or objectionable.

We urge you to reaffirm the importance and value of the freedom to read by retaining *To Kill A Mockingbird, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Of Mice and Men, The Cay,* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in the curriculum. By doing so, the Burbank Unified School District 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,

Deborah Caldwell Stone  
Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom  
American Library Association