

ALA American Library Association

Office for Intellectual Freedom

April 29, 2020

Superintendent
Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District
501 North Gulkana Street
Palmer, AK 99645

Dear Dr. Monica Goyette and Matanuska-Susitna Borough School Board,

As organizations supporting the freedom to read, educational excellence, and academic freedom, we write to express our deep concern about the recent decision by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School Board to eliminate five novels and *The New York Times* from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District's high school elective English curriculum.

All five novels — *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald — are acclaimed, award-winning works of literature that are taught by high schools throughout the United States.

Class discussions of these novels provide students a forum for grappling intellectually and emotionally with difficult issues under the guidance of caring and experienced educators and counselors. 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 their own — essential competencies that are necessary for success in college and in life.

Far from endorsing inappropriate behavior, these books do the opposite. For example, Maya Angelou acknowledges the strength of a protagonist who survives incest and racism; Ralph Ellison highlights the ingenuity and courage of a protagonist who overcomes racism. Similarly, Tim O'Brien celebrates the resilience and camaraderie of those serving in the military while highlighting the moral paradoxes inherent in fighting a war. Honest depictions of harsh realities don't victimize students who read about them; instead, they help those who are victims deal with the issues in their lives, and provide other students opportunities to discuss such subjects with trusted adults and classmates in a manner that does not trivialize them.

A catalog of unfounded complaints — the sole grounds for identifying these novels as "controversial" — should not serve as a true measure of a novel's literary or educational value nor as grounds for forbidding their study. While the American Library Association gathers and reports on challenges to books around the country, they are careful to note that each complaint represents a single person's subjective opinion about the book, not the finding of a board or panel charged with thoroughly evaluating the materials for educational purposes that are designed to provide students with an

academically rigorous educational experience. Indeed, in nearly every case of a challenge to a novel or resource, the complaint is determined to be unfounded and the book or resource worthy of continued inclusion in the curriculum based on its literary and educational value.

Nor is the subjective belief that a novel might spur an EEOC complaint or a lawsuit valid grounds for removing these books from the curriculum. The laws of the EEOC administers are not intended as a tool for censorship. Instead, they target unacceptable behavior in the workplace that creates intolerable conditions of employment. The practice of guiding students in the study of award-winning literature is not within their purview, nor is it within the purview of the courts, which protect the right to teach and read and consider ideas under the First Amendment.

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 educators 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.

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. Indeed, Mat-Su's policies already provide an alternative option for parents and students who object to these works – already designated as elective study – by allowing them to opt out and ask for an alternative assignment.

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District has a responsibility to represent a broad range of viewpoints in its curriculum that reflects the multiplicity of views, beliefs, and opinions in the community. The school district, as a public educational agency bound by the Constitution, should strive to support academic freedom and students' constitutional right to access a broad range of ideas, opinions, and viewpoints as part of their education, including those materials that some may find controversial or objectionable. Allowing the personal beliefs of a vocal minority to determine what students can read and teachers can teach not only violates the language, spirit and the intent of the First Amendment, but it also deprives Mat-Su's students of the opportunity to benefit from the experience of reading award-winning literature, an educational and intellectual exercise that other students in high schools around the country will experience and benefit from as they continue with their careers and lives beyond the high school classroom.

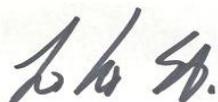
Given that the school board's vote to remove the novels and *The New York Times* from high school elective English courses was done outside the established curriculum review process, without any opportunity for public comment or input by the district's professional educators, we ask that you "reset the clock" and provide all parties – students, parents, educators, and community members – with a fair opportunity to have their concerns heard and allow for evaluation of the books pursuant to the standards outlined in the district's policies, including its policy on controversial issues. By doing so, you will not only affirm the district's commitment to academic freedom, free inquiry, and First Amendment values, but you will also send a powerful message to your students – that, in this country, they have the right to read what they choose and the responsibility 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



Lorelei Sterling
Alaska State Chapter Councilor
American Library Association



Ann K. Symons
Past President
American Library Association



Emily Knox
President
Freedom to Read Foundation



David Grogan
Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Charles Brownstein
Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



Deborah Rinio
President
Alaska Library Association



Erin Hollingsworth
Co-Chair, Intellectual Freedom Committee
Alaska Library Association



Rebecca Moorman
Co-Chair, Intellectual Freedom Committee
Alaska Library Association



Pamela Verfaillie
President
Alaska Association of School Librarians



Robert Barr
Past President
Alaska Library Association



Janet Madsen
Past President
Alaska Association of School Librarians



Joshua A. Decker
Executive Director
American Civil Liberties Union of Alaska