

**NATIONAL  
COALITION  
AGAINST  
CENSORSHIP**

**KIDS'  
RIGHT  
TO READ**

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October 21, 2019

Dr. Sandra Carraway, Superintendent  
Columbia County Schools  
4781 Hereford Farm Road  
Evans, GA 30809

**Sent via Electronic Mail to:** [scarraway@ccboe.net](mailto:scarraway@ccboe.net)

Dear Dr. Carraway,

As organizations dedicated to the freedom to read and the application of First Amendment law in public institutions, we were concerned to learn that the following three novels were excluded from the Columbia County High School supplemental curriculum based on isolated references to sex, violence or "graphic depictions": *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone and *Regeneration* by Pat Barker.

We would like to offer you our guidance to help ensure that Columbia County students' academic freedom is safeguarded. We hope you will take the following legal and educational considerations into account as you work to develop stronger procedures for the selection and review of both instructional and media center materials and reconsider the novels under the revised policies. We are attaching policy guidelines to assist in revising your procedures.

We understand from an October 15 phone conversation with you that your administration followed Columbia County Board policies and procedures by convening a committee of high school teachers to read and recommend books for the supplemental reading list. We also understand that the committee submitted its recommendation for 17 books last spring. The day before the start of school each teacher was instructed to flag pages containing "explicit language" as well as depictions of violence or sex for your review. We understand that in reaction to these isolated passages, and without the full committee having read the books, the three aforementioned books were struck from the Committee-approved list.

Certain flaws in Columbia County's procedure invite viewpoint discrimination, which is a violation of the First Amendment. First, to reduce the risk that decisions will be based on personal prejudice instead of pedagogical expertise, we strongly recommend that you increase the number of reviewers for each book. Rather than a two-person team of teachers reviewing each book, we would advise you to enlist more teachers, support from librarians, and administrators.

This will allow for a plurality of expert opinion and strengthen the credibility of their recommendations.

Second, the Supreme Court has stressed that school officials should weigh the educational value of learning materials *in their entirety*, not through isolated passages. In this case, your ultimate decision was based on the last-minute review of isolated passages with decontextualized referenced to sex, violence or profanity. Had you considered the complete works of literature and their relevance to curricular goals, life lessons and real world experiences, you may have better understood the literary value of each passage and why the trained teachers on the Novel Committee selected these critically-acclaimed books.

Mild references to sex or violence may seem gratuitous and “inappropriate” unless placed in their proper context. For instance, in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* -- which won the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize -- a 15-year old autistic teen narrates his investigation of his neighbor’s dog’s murder for a school project. The [Gainesville Times](#) calls the story “enlightening both in that it offers a point of view we don’t often see, and that it makes the reader question the true meanings of reason and emotion.”

Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin* “could be a news story any day in America,” according to a [Common Sense Media](#) review, which strongly recommends the “endearing and painfully realistic” novel to teens. Indeed, *Dear Martin* tells the story of a black teen who, after being profiled and shot by police, documents his struggles with the harsh reality of racism in America in a journal of letters to Martin Luther King, Jr. For many students in Columbia County and across the country, police shootings of unarmed black people is intimately familiar and the educational value of the question “*what would Martin do?*” is undeniable. *Dear Martin* speaks to many black teens’ experiences with racism and explores the different historical approaches to confronting racist violence, while offering words of affirmation and healing.

*Regeneration*, the first novel in Pat Barker’s Booker Prize-winning trilogy, won the New York Times Book of the Year award for its exploration of war’s impact on notions of identity, masculinity and the social psyche. While set during World War I, “the war doesn’t feature much,” according to a [Teen Ink](#) book review, which recommends the novel for teens. Barker’s moving portrait of the human struggle to overcome the psychological traumas of war poses valuable questions about the consequences of violence and the power of empathy that can lead to deeper life lessons.

We understand that your objective was not to censor the Columbia County curriculum. The unfortunate reality, however, is that anytime public officials restrict students’ access to content on the basis of viewpoint rather than legitimate pedagogical objectives, they undermine First Amendment-protected freedoms.

We hope you will continue to reflect on your administration’s public charge to *educate* -- not to parent -- youth. The Supreme Court has clarified that even the *in loco parentis* doctrine does not

immunize school officials from their constitutional obligations to students.<sup>1</sup> It is every parent's right to decide what their child may or may not read; it is the state's public responsibility to ensure that students' access to literature is not limited by viewpoint, even when some parents find it objectionable.

We hope you will abide by your obligation to protect Columbia County students' access to rich and diverse literature like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *Dear Martin* and *Regeneration*.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us for support as you work to strengthen procedures to prevent future acts of censorship.

With warm regards,



Chris Finan, Executive Director  
National Coalition Against Censorship



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



David Grogan, Executive Director  
American Booksellers for Free Expression



Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director  
The Authors Guild



Lin Oliver, Executive Director  
Society of Children's Books  
Writers and Illustrators



Fatima Sheikh, Co-Chair  
PEN America  
Children and Young Adults Book Committee

**Cc: Columbia County School Board**

Mr. David Dekle, Chairman ([ddekle@daviddeklelaw.com](mailto:ddekle@daviddeklelaw.com))  
Ms. Lee Ann Meyer, Vice-Chairwoman/District 4 ([LeeAnn.Meyer@ccboe.net](mailto:LeeAnn.Meyer@ccboe.net))  
Mr. David Alalof, District 1 ([DAalalof@achsinsurance.com](mailto:DAalalof@achsinsurance.com))  
Mrs. Kristi Baker, District 2 ([Kbaker430@aol.com](mailto:Kbaker430@aol.com))  
Mrs. Judy Teasley, District 3 ([jteasley@ccboe.net](mailto:jteasley@ccboe.net))

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<sup>1</sup> *New Jersey v. T.L.O.*, 469 U.S. 325 at 336 (1985) ("Today's public school officials do not merely exercise authority voluntarily conferred on them by individual parents; rather, they act in furtherance of publicly mandated educational and disciplinary policies.")