

## Board Notes

3/18/2024

A special meeting of the School Board was held Monday, March 18, 2024, at 6:00 p.m. in the New Prairie United School Corporation Board Room with Mr. Phil King, Mrs. Jill Smith, Mr. Dale Groves and Mr. Rich Gadacz present. Dr. Paul White, Superintendent, was also present.

Mr. Jason DeMeyer was absent.

There was motion by Mr. Groves to Adopt the Agenda, seconded by Mr. Gadacz and approved 4-0-1.

Mr. Phil King, Board President, stated that the purpose of this "Let's Talk Session" is to provide members of the community with the opportunity to speak to the Board regarding the appeal to the Reconsideration Committee's recommendation on the following book challenges: The Poet X, Friction, Smoke, Glass, Impulse, Burned, Crank, and Me & Earl and the Dying Girl.

Mr. King continued that Per Board Policy 0167.3, the Let's Talk Session will last approximately one-half (½) hour. The presiding officer may prohibit public comments which are frivolous, repetitive, or harassing and may request any individual to leave the meeting when that person behaves in a manner that is disruptive of the orderly conduct of the meeting. Remarks by any person addressing the Board which reflect adversely upon the character or motives of any other person or group are considered out of order. All comments should be directed to the Board only.

Mr. King stated that as long as the conversation is productive, the Board will allow the Let's Talk session to exceed the 30 minutes allotted per board policy. To start, the challenger of the book challenges will have an opportunity to address the board not to exceed 10 minutes. From there, using the registration forms turned in, he said that he will call names in the order in which the forms were received. Forms will be accepted until the challenger has finished addressing the Board. Each community member will be limited to one appearance and three minutes. When the community member speaking has 30 seconds left, Board Secretary, Mrs. Smith, will raise her hand to let you know.

Mr. King invited Mrs. Sass, NPUSC Curriculum Director, to the podium to explain the process of why the committee was formed, who made up the committee and the process of reviewing the books. Mrs. Sass said the Reconsideration Committee includes: teachers, administrators, students, parents and CO representation. Each committee member read the books and were provided with the petitioner's reason for the request to remove it, as well as, book reviews. The recommendation was guided as directed by the Board using the following criteria

- The appropriateness of the material for the age and maturity level of the students who have access to it;
- The accuracy of the material;
- The objectivity of the material;
- The use being made of the material;
- And does the material submitted satisfy the definition of obscene or harmful to minors as defined by Ind. Code 35-49-2-1 and Ind, Code 35-49-2-2

The reconsideration committee met and discussed each book and the petitioner was invited to these meetings. After the committee reflected on their personal notes, committee discussion, petitioner's reason for the request and book reviews there was an anonymous vote. The recommendation for each book was then submitted to Dr. White.

Mr. King explained that as a result of the criteria listed the reconsideration committee did recommend the continued use of the library material in question at the current location by a majority vote. Each Board member was given a copy of the reconsideration committees notes along with the petitioner's request to remove.

Mr. King opened the floor to the petitioner, Ms. Heather Oake, to approach the podium to address the Board for 10 minutes. Mr. King stated that Ms. Oake

Heather Oake, the challenger of the books, explained that she is present to ask for the removal of the books: Me, & Earl and the Dying Girl, Friction, The Poet X, Smoke, Glass, Impulse, Burned and Crank. She read excerpts from the books and explained why they are inappropriate for school. She stated that if there are children present and don't want them to hear this then you might want them to leave the room.

Mr. King asked for a pause to state that a few excerpts are fine but it is not necessary to read all that she did last time as the Board was given those notes previously. Mr. King restarted Heather Oake's time.

Heather Oake read the excerpts from there. She went on to state that book burning and banning is not what is being asked at this meeting. Displaying age appropriate material is something that school Libraries have always done. Choosing to not have a book in the Library is considered book banning then every school library is a book banner because all the books that have been written are not in school libraries. The librarian has to pick and choose which books to allow. Regarding freedom of speech and expression, the New Prairie Student Handbook states "in order to protect the educational process and school environment, printed material produced or distributed within the confines of school district property shall meet the following criteria: the material shall not contain libelous or obscene language, material shall not advocate illegal actions; material shall not advocate actions that would endanger the health or safety of student. These books go against this policy with discussions regarding drug use which are illegal and are dangerous to the health and safety of students along with obscene language. If the words written in these books were said in movies or music they would be rated "R" or "Explicit" and not allowed to be played in school. Why is a book any different? We need to get back to the basics and choose books that are wholesome and encouraging, positive and uplifting. The parents want their children to read these books so they can learn about rape, abortion, sex, drugs etc. then they can choose to do that at home. Parents should not have to research each library book their students checkout because they are worried about what topics will be discussed between the pages and at many other schools they don't.

Mr. King opened the floor to anyone who turned in a registration form.

Mr. King then called Cynthia Heckman-Davis to the podium to begin.

Cynthia Heckman-Davis introduced herself as a mother of public-school students, a wife, a Christian and a proud patriot and joyful warrior against censorship and book

replacement. She thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak. She speaks in support of the reconsideration committee's recommendation to keep the books in question in their current spots on the shelves. She stated she remembers parts of the book called the "The Poet X" as part of the book club about teen pregnancy and can see where the book could be of value to those who read it. None of the books are obscene according to State Law and most have been on the library shelves for some time now. Those who are contesting books are afraid. They mask their fear of others by reading passages out of context. They are afraid their child will find a book's character or concept that conflicts with the parents' beliefs. But despite efforts to shield them, their children will encounter different people and different concepts and isn't that a part of education? Learning to deal respectfully with people who are different than us? Those who contest various books are also trying to sew distrust in public schools. She trusts the decision. She hopes the Board will keep these books available to those who need them. If their children do read one of these books she hopes parents will see it as an opportunity to teach respect for others and to discuss their beliefs with their children at an age appropriate level as is their right. She also speaks tonight as a member of the St. Joseph County Freedom Readers.

Mr. King called Jessica Vanwanzeele to the podium.

Jessica VanWanzele stated that tonight she found an article from the Teachers College Press from Columbia University titled "What happens when young people actually read disturbing books". It was published in October of 2023. This article highlights what happens when four 8th grade teachers who were worried about their students disinterest in reading decided to quit assigning books to kids and let them choose whatever books interested them. Those teachers allowed their students to have open discussion in class about the books they chose. The results were not what they expected. The kids did start reading in and out of school. Their reading achievement records improved and that is not all; the students reported feeling like they were becoming better people. They reported higher self-esteem, more empathy, better self-control, being less judgmental and overall feeling happier. They found the books they were most interested in were the ones that dealt with the most difficult situations. Many of the books that were being read were the same books or similar to the books that are being challenged all over the country today. Parents, students and teachers all reported improved communication and relationships as a result of their reading. The kids would pester their parents to read the books so they can discuss them. The parents that did found that these books were great opportunities to have conversations with their kids about drugs, sex, relationships and depression through the characters of the books. Initially the parents and teachers were cautious about some of the books but after open discussions with the students they found that these students were not wanting to emulate the characters in the book but rather looked at them as cautionary tales. They said the books helped them to see the consequences of problematic decisions. The study observed many classroom discussions and found that the conversations were widely meaningful, relationship building and even philosophical. The students reported that the complexity of the characters' lives made them more grateful for their own lives and their family. The bad words and disturbing scenes simply fed the bigger conversations about life and relationships. The article interviewed 300 students over the course of four years and has many more insightful things to offer but time is limited. She brought copies of the article for the members of the School Board and also some extras for anyone interested in reading what the case studies find. To conclude she wanted to say that there is evidence that reading difficult books actually improves mental health, grades, engagement and critical thinking skills. The fear tactics need to

stop. Leave the decisions on what to read up to the kids, their parents and the people that know them. Don't remove books from our libraries and thank you for your time.

Ali VanWanzeele thanked the Board for allowing her to speak about her future. She stated that she will be entering Middle School this fall. The decision you make today affects her more than it affects any of you. She stated that she loves to read. She stated that she has one of the highest Lexile levels in the entire 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She has struggled to find books to read in her elementary school library. Reading counts points were hard for her to get because the books in her grade level were not interesting to her. Luckily, she has been supported by her parents and her teachers to read what interests her and not just to focus on points. She is in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and has an 11<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. She does not want parents who are not her own, making decisions on what she can read. These parents do not know her and aren't her teachers or mentors. They have no idea of her maturity level, her personality or the things that interest her or the struggles she faces. She does not need to be controlled, she needs to be encouraged and if there is a subject she is interested in reading about, that decision should be made between her parents, herself and her teacher. They know her and care about her as an individual not as a political talking point. She is a person and a student. She stated she is not a "Mom's for Liberty" pawn. Please do not take books away from her. She deserves the right to make the decision about what she reads with the people who know and care for her. A stranger should not get to make that decision. Ali thanked the Board for letting her speak.

Jamie Talboom thanked the Board for allowing her to speak again. She began by stating that she read all the books that are under consideration tonight. She did that because she believes that if you are going to stand up for something then you should be educated on it so she read every single book. She explained that she is going to focus on two of the books "Crank" and "Glass". For those that have not read these books she gave a quick reading excerpt of what they are about. Crank is a story of a character based on the author's daughter, Christina. "The monster" in the book refers to the highly addictive drug crystal meth. Christina is the perfect daughter, she is a gifted high school junior, and she has never gotten in any trouble. During a court order visit to her absentee father, she was introduced to the drug. The story is about her journey into addiction. The book "Crank" is the second book in the trilogy. In the book "Crank" Christina ends up pregnant and is determined she is going to take control of her life and determine how much and when she is going to use the drug. Unfortunately, the monster is stronger than she is and has her back in its grips. Jamie Talboom went on with telling her own story. She stated she lost her baby sister to drug addiction so she understands what these books are about. She explained that she lacked empathy for her sister until she read these books. She could not have told this story without reading these books as it touched her heart because she realized what her sister had gone through and it really drove it home to her. If you have been lucky enough to have never witnessed drug addiction you should be very glad because it is real and it out there and it does not have a bias. Having a loving mother, being a straight "A" student, being a part of a middle or upper class does not stop you from falling victim to this kind of atrocity. Banning books like this does not protect your children from the atrocities in this world. Banning books like these only stops parents from being able to have this discussion with the children. Books like these do allow parents to have these open dialogues with hard topics. Books like these let children know they are not alone in their journey and it gives them empathy for other people. Finally, if "Moms for Liberty" is truly about educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights, then she asked them and the School Board to uphold the committee's decision to not ban these

books. She also asked to allow parents to parent, teachers to teach, and encourage children to read. Thank you.

Heather O'Connell explained that she read 4 of the books and was on the committee. She stated that she loved the books. It was incredible the stories that were told, the hard heartbreak that people can experience in life that thank goodness she hasn't had to walk through. She stated that the way they were beautifully written was incredible. The author, Ellen Hopkins, was a poet whose book was written in prose. It took her 40 pages to get the feel of it but after she started reading it she couldn't put it down. The biggest point for her was, as a parent looking back at her own childhood, if the first time she had come across the topic of drug, sex and anything else difficult in life was through a book, it might have been better than hearing it from her middle school and high school friend who taught her about those topics. Instead she could have read it from a book and used it as a personal reflection so maybe if she had made that decision it could have led her down a path that she read about and could have changed her life. She really is impressed by the committee, which also included students, for putting in the time and effort to actually read the books and not just reading the excerpts of the books. It was impactful to listen to what the committee had to say.

Kristen Sikorski-Conklin thanked Dr. White and the School Board for the opportunity to speak this evening. She began by stating that she is there not only as a parent but also as a community mental health therapist advocating that the books being challenged continue to remain in the middle school library. She wants to speak on the books she read in their entirety that includes "Smoke", "Glass", "Impulse" and "Burned" all written by Ellen Hopkins. Kristen stated she feels strongly that in order to make a recommendation it is imperative to have a complete understanding of the book. Each of these books touched on difficult topics, including substance abuse, mental illness, and trauma. Topics that are hard to discuss and process are real. Reading these books did not leave her, as a reader, to feel these topics were being glorified but instead gave a real and raw perspective. Mental illness, substance abuse and trauma can impact everyone. Nobody is exempt from experiencing hardships such as these. She pointed out that messages of healing, recovery and hope can also be found in the pages of these books. The author had a way of letting the reader know that recovery is possible and not to lose hope even in some of the most difficult situations. She understands individuals will have a wide variety of viewpoints and opinions when deciding whether or not they want their children to have access to knowledge and information about mental illness, substance abuse and/or trauma. She also understands that while to some these topics are off limits, they are in fact real challenges being faced today. Banning these books from the library will not make these challenges go away or disappear. She fully supports that parents have the right to decide what materials their children are exposed to; that does not mean that parents should also have the ability to determine what other children are able to read. She challenged parents to be engaged in their children's lives and clearly communicate their expectations of what content their children can have access to. Additionally, she urges parents to teach an important lesson to our children that viewpoints and beliefs different from your own are ok. We can agree to disagree and still display respect to one another. In conclusion she asks the members of the School Board to please uphold the decision on these books that was recommended by the appointed committee members. Thank you.

Trent Doll introduced himself as being a student here at New Prairie High School. He explained he is here to oppose the proposed removal of the eight books from the library in support of the reconsideration committee's recommendation. He believes that the

idea of censorship or restricting of access to any literature for its content matter is deeply flawed in its logic. He has been reading literature for as long as he can remember. He said that one thing he has learned is that the mentioning of certain topics in writing is not the advocacy for such topics. For example, in the novel "Crank" drugs and drug abuse are topics that are heavily discussed. Does this mean that the author Ellen Hopkins advocates for the use of illicit drugs? Of course not. If anything, the author is doing the exact opposite by showing the highly negative effects of doing such things and the issues addiction brings. He believes that the heavy subject matters in many of these books are for the purpose of informing the reader rather than persuading them to do negative things. He believes that anyone that takes an interest in these books feels the same. In the book "Burned" much of the story revolves around familial views and having an upbringing steeped in such an awful environment. Does this mean we should review books like "The Glass Castle"? A book he read as a class his sophomore year as well for having similar themes or "To Kill a Mockingbird" for mentions of rape, and the use of slurs? Of course not. Because we simply examine the effects of having such an upbringing and the effects of such abuse in a community. We weren't motivated to abuse and neglect our children simply because we read about it. This is why my firmest belief is that we provide warnings and examples of what may come from negative things such as abuse and drugs. Sheltering us from these books is simply irresponsible as you are restricting and depriving us of access to stories, fiction or not, that may provide valuable lessons to those that read the books on the basis of prudishness. I yield my time. Thank you.

Ashley Kosowski introduced herself as the current mother of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader stating that she has read 5 of the 8 books. She prefaced by saying reading anything out of context will point out any belief that you want to. Ms. Talboom did a great job on the "Crank" series so she would like to go into "Smoke" and "Burned". The excerpt that was read was about a Mormon girl being raped and her father finding her and beating her. It shows how you can then overcome familial abuse. "Burned" explains how doing drugs and drinking and other things like that can lead to more rocketed behaviors also showing why you should not do those things. Her third-grade son is actually listening to some of these books on tape with me, giving us a chance to discuss before he is going to hear them on the back of the bus or at a party or at recess or whatever. She strongly hopes the Board will continue to keep these books available to children.

Adriane Henrich stated that excerpts were read aloud so she focused her time on arguments she heard the last time she was here for books and what she heard online. Argument number 1; kids hear this stuff at home on video games and TV, not in every house, not in every home and should not be available at school. The parents should have the opportunity to talk to these kids about these topics not learning about them in a book. The opposing argument number 2; those opposing these books want to burn books, that is a strong man argument. They don't belong in a school library. They are fine in a public library. Maybe in the high school library, not for 11-13 year olds. Argument number 3; don't stifle kids' reading no matter what book. You wouldn't hand your kid porn magazines and say at least they are reading. Some of these books are downright pornographic in their verbiage in their description. You don't want them watching it, they shouldn't be reading it either. There are plenty of wholesome, engaging books out there. We don't have to just settle for these books because at least they are reading. Argument number 4; those opposed are probably just taking the excerpts out of context. How can that possibly be taken out of context? Argument number 5; this is just a wild mob of online people all supporting a certain online group. She hasn't attended a single meeting of that group. She is not in that circle and I still

oppose these books. Argument number 6; their kids don't even go to school here and you're right, mine don't, not anymore. I live in district and my taxpayer money goes toward these books. I went to school here from Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I love this school and made sure to buy my home in this district so my kids could get the same wonderful education I did. I really got a good education here. I even got a job within the school and that is when my jaw dropped, so many secrets. I quit my job and pulled my kid mid-year and did not look back. So, if you're disgusted with the lack of concern and protection from the school system don't be afraid to get your kids the heck out of here and homeschool or online school. I can provide you with resources and there is a huge support system. Thank you.

Austin Kosinski next said that he would like to speak in favor of reconsidering. He stands with Senate bill 17 going through that our kids may be going to the library for some things but he doesn't think they should be going to the Middle School Library to find pornographic material. He may extend that some of this may be out of context but cannot really get much clearer. Mr. Kosinski understands that the school's population may be trending downwards but doesn't think that ending pornographic books to middle school students is a way to boost population.

Tom Pietrzak gave a word of praise to the two young people who spoke tonight. He can relate to them because he has a daughter graduating this year in the top ten. One of her passions has always been reading and from what he heard tonight are exactly what he heard from his daughter. She loves to read and be challenged and her academics are because of that and has been incredible. She is going to school this fall at one of the top universities in the country. Her love of reading and not suppressing her love of reading is one of the big reasons that she is going and can't say enough about that. He addressed Ali stating her future is going to be wonderful and in the right direction. He supports the Board and the reconsideration committee for all they have been doing. He said this entire process is playing out all over the country, in Florida they are considering setting new legislation now because it's out of control. They don't have the man hours to review the books anymore because they are coming in so fast. So, they are considering legislation that would restrict the number of rejected books somebody can have then fine them based on every book after that point. So, he thinks the challenge will get easier over time. Thank you to all the people that are involved in reading all these books to understand them better.

Cathy Hensell stated that she attended New Prairie High School for 4 years and graduated from there in 1973. She was a member of the library club at New Prairie and enjoyed being involved and helping out in the library at that time. Things were simpler at the time, you didn't have to worry about if this or that book had inappropriate material because at the time hard core pornographic material was not allowed in the school's system. She cannot understand why the inclusion of pornographic literature in middle school would be considered in the best interest to these young children. She doesn't view this as a progressive step forward for our middle schoolers, just a sad commentary of the current state of education in this country.

Mr. King asked if the Board members had anything to say? There were no comments from the Board.

Mr. King explained that at this time the Board will vote on each title challenge separately. Mr. King stated that the voting will be as follows: he will ask those in favor of accepting the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of

the library material in question and its current location and signify by raising your hand or the other question would be those in favor of further evaluating the reconsideration committee's recommendation and bring it to a vote at a future regular Board meeting signify by raising your hand. The Board will not be voting whether to remove any library materials tonight. If the Board chooses to further reevaluate a library material which may or may not lead to removal a future date will be set so the Board may read the material in full in order to make a determination.

**Action Items:**

- (A) The first book: *Poet X*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of the material, *Poet X*, at its current location
- (B) The second book: *Friction*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Friction* at its current location
- (C) The third book: *Smoke*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Smoke* at its current location
- (D) The fourth book: *Glass*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Glass* at its current location
- (E) The fifth book: *Impulse*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Impulse* at its current location
- (F) The sixth book: *Burned*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Burned* at its current location
- (G) The seventh book: *Crank*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Crank* at its current location
- (H) The eighth book: *Me & Earl and the Dying Girl*  
The Board voted 4-0-1 to accept the reconsideration committee's recommendation for the continued use of *Me & Earl and the Dying Girl* at its current location

Mr. King stated the next regular Board meeting will be Monday, March 25, 2024 at Olive Twp. Elementary School in Room 142, The Tiger Den.

Mr. King asked if the Board had any further business. There was no further business from the Board. Mr. King adjourned the meeting.