

KETCHIKAN GATEWAY BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
AGENDA STATEMENT

No. 10 c.

MEETING OF April 24, 2024

Item Title:

Reviewed By

NEW BUSINESS

Superintendent

Motion related to the review and consideration of the Superintendent's determination in response to a complaint concerning instructional materials in use at KGBSD schools RE: Red Hood, written by Elana Arnold

Review Committee

SUBMITTED BY Michael Robbins, Superintendent, 907 247 2109

SUMMARY STATEMENT:

The Board of Education is being asked to review and reconsider the determination of District Administration in relation to a complaint filed by a citizen concerning the use of the book titled, Red Hood, written by Elana Arnold.

ISSUE:

Board Policy 1312.20 Public Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials provides an opportunity for citizens to file complaints and concerns with the District regarding materials in use in instructional programming including textbooks, supplementary textbooks, library books, and other instructional materials and equipment. Under Board policy, the complainant has a right to request reconsideration and final decision of the determination by the Board in their role as governing body over curricular matters as well as involvement in some instructional decisions.

BACKGROUND:

A complaint was filed regarding the use of the book, Red Hood, in accordance with BP 1312.2. A review committee was formed, and a recommendation was given by the committee to the Superintendent in accordance with BP 1312.2. The Superintendent accepted the recommendation to retain the book in the Ketchikan High School library. After receipt of the Superintendent's decision, the complainant has requested a review of this decision by the School Board.

RECOMMENDATION: Uphold/Revoke/Modify the Superintendent's determination/recommendation

EXHIBITS ATTACHED

- Board Policy/Administrative Regulation 1312.20

- Complainants Request for School Board reconsideration of the Superintendent's decision
- Library Review Committee – Review and Recommendation
- Notice of Superintendent's Decision on Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials, Red Hood, by Elana Arnold

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

"I move that the Board of Education [revoke, modify, or uphold] the Superintendent's determination and recommendation in relation to the complaint concerning instructional materials regarding the book, Red Hood, by Elana Arnold."

The School Board takes great care in the adoption of instructional materials and is aware that all adopted materials may not be acceptable to all students, their parents/guardians, or other district residents.

(cf. 6161.1 – Selection and Evaluation of Instructional Materials) (cf. 6161.11 – Supplementary Instructional Materials)

The Superintendent or designee shall establish procedures which will permit proper consideration of any complaints against the use of any instructional materials, including textbooks, supplementary textbooks, library books, and other instructional materials and equipment.

(cf. 1312.3 – Public Complaint Concerning Discrimination)

The School Board believes the Superintendent and staff are well qualified to consider complaints concerning instructional materials. Complainants are advised to consider and accept the Superintendent or designee's decision as final. However, if the complainant finds the decision of the Superintendent or designee unsatisfactory, he/she may request that the matter be placed on the agenda of a regular Board meeting.

The School Board's decision in any such case will be based on educational suitability and will not be influenced by a desire to suppress information or deny students access to ideas with which the School Board disagrees.

(cf. 6144 – Controversial Issues)

KETCHIKAN GATEWAY BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Adoption Date: 10/13/99

Reviewed (Policy Committee): June 2021

Complaints concerning instructional materials will be accepted only from staff, district residents, or the parents/guardians of children enrolled in a district school.

Complaints must be presented in writing to the principal on the appropriate district form. (See Exhibit.) Complaints regarding printed material must specify the precise nature of the objection. The statement must be signed and identified in such a way that a proper reply will be possible. Individual students may be excused from using challenged materials after the parent/guardian has presented a written complaint. The teacher will then assign the student alternate materials of equal merit. Use of the materials by a class, school or the district, however, shall not be restricted until so directed by the Superintendent or their designee.

Upon receiving a written complaint, the principal will acknowledge its receipt and answer any questions regarding procedure verbally and in writing. The principal will then notify the Superintendent or their designee and the teacher(s) involved of the complaint.

The Superintendent or their designee will determine whether the complaint should be considered on an individual basis or whether a review committee should be convened. The Superintendent or their designee has the discretion to deny consideration of the written complaint. Any such denial by the Superintendent or their designee shall be considered final action of the district on the written complaint.

The use of challenged materials by class, school or district shall not be restricted until final disposition has been made by the district.

A review committee may be formed under the direction of the Superintendent or their designee. It shall be composed of three or more staff members selected by the Superintendent or their designee from relevant administrative and instructional areas.

In deliberating challenged materials, the review committee shall consider the educational philosophy of the district; the professional opinions of other teachers of the subject and of other competent authorities; reviews of the materials by reputable bodies; the teacher's stated objectives in using the materials; and the objections of the complainant.

The review committee shall determine the extent to which the challenged material supports the curriculum, the educational appropriateness of the material, and its suitability for the age level of the student. The review committee has the discretion to determine whether it shall review the entire instructional material or only certain sections of the instructional material.

Within 60 days of being convened, the review committee shall summarize its findings in a written report and submit it to the Superintendent or their designee for final action. The Superintendent or their designee may approve request(s) from the review committee for additional time to conduct its review. The Superintendent or their designee shall notify the complainant of their decision regarding the complaint no later than 60 days after the review committee submits its written report for final action.

If the complainant finds that the final action of the Superintendent or their designee is unsatisfactory, they may request to have the matter placed on the agenda of a school board meeting. The Board President determines if the matter will be placed on the agenda of a school board meeting.

When any challenged instructional material is reviewed by the district, it shall not be subject to any additional reconsideration for 12 months.

State-Adopted Material

If the challenged material has been adopted by the State Board of Education, the Superintendent or their designee may forward the complaint, without action, to the Department of Education for reevaluation and decision.

KETCHIKAN GATEWAY BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Adoption Date: 10/13/99

Revision Date: 8/14/19

Revision Date: 12/7/23

Revision Date: 1/17/24

February 1, 2024

To: Michael Robbins, Superintendent
Melissa Johnson, Assistant Superintendent
Rick Dormer, KHS Principal

From: Library Review Committee

RE: Complaint of *Red Hood*

A review committee has met regarding the complaint about *Red Hood, a book* by Elana Arnold. The complainant had multiple concerns about this book, specifically,

- Excessive, explicit sexual descriptions, all of which take place between minors
- Excessive, explicit descriptions of murder and death
- Excessive vulgar language
- Excessive, explicit descriptions of menstruation
- Descriptions of criminal behavior
- Descriptions of minors committing illegal acts
- Descriptions of minors unwilling to tell adults of criminal acts committed by others against them
- Encouragement of vigilantism
- Incongruous and gratuitous political ideology and racism

This book is a retelling of the *Red Riding Hood* fairy tale, brought into the modern day with a young woman who sees the trauma caused by men and young men around her. Written after the #MeToo Movement, it is a dark and bloody tale, and full of the anger that swirled following the reports of sexual abuse by Harvey Weinstein in 2017.

It is undeniably a difficult book to read, with intensely graphic descriptions. The Booklist (a leading US review source) [reviewer wrote](#): “It is a book of blood, where menstruation empowers, predators bleed out, sisterhood is forged, and genetics bestow unasked for responsibilities. So read, shed your pelt, and be transformed—for blades are being sharpened.”

The School Board [policy on Libraries/Media Centers](#) states that: “School libraries have a responsibility to nurture intellectual growth and freedom by providing:

1. *Materials that support and enrich the curriculum, taking into consideration students' varied interests, abilities, maturity levels and learning styles.*
2. *Materials that will stimulate growth in factual knowledge, literary appreciation, aesthetic values and ethical standards.*
3. *Information that will support students' personal needs and enable them to make intelligent judgments in their daily lives.*

4. *Materials that present opposing sides of controversial issues, so that students may learn, with guidance, how to analyze and think critically about what they read.*
5. *Materials which realistically depict our pluralistic society and reflect the contributions of its various religious, ethnic and cultural groups.*

While this is indeed a difficult book to read, it is the view of this committee that this book meets many of the above points. There are two particular phrases to address here. The first is that the library should provide materials *“that support and enrich the curriculum, taking into consideration students' varied interests, abilities, maturity levels and learning styles.”*

This work supports the KHS curriculum in addressing the issues of the abuse and rape of young women. The State of Alaska requires that schools follow two separate pieces of legislation under the [Alaska Safe Children's Act](#). This includes both AS 14.30.355, known as Erin's Law, and AS 14.30.356, known as Bree's Law. Schools must provide training to help prevent the sexual abuse of children and teen dating abuse. Our book collections must do the same. Clearly, this book is not for everyone, but that is true for every book. And this will be the book that some need.

A review from [BookPage.com](#) writes that the book “Recognizes that teens can and do become the victims of violence just as easily as adults. In a culture where violent acts are reported on the news every night, stories to help teens confront and reckon with this reality are vital. Award winner Arnold (*Damsel, What Girls Are Made Of*) addresses her readership with knowledge and ease, even when writing about delicate subjects such as sexuality, consent or the victim-blaming that can occur after an assault.”

In addition, this work is especially important in supporting *“students' personal needs and [enabling] them to make intelligent judgments in their daily lives”*. Our students ARE engaging in sexual activity; removing books with this content will not change the behaviors. We must be responsible in providing accurate and meaningful materials that address our students' lives fully. This includes materials that discuss - within proper developmental guidelines - sexual development and activity.

Our health teacher reports that descriptions of menstruation and condom use within this book are accurate and valuable. The teacher also mentions that there are many conversations that teen characters have with parents and trusted adults around them; this is an important aspect of the story: the teen characters are often shown in conversations with adults, and acting with adult support. This is a highly positive portrayal of child-parent (grandparent, in this case) relationships.

As a fairy tale retelling, we might remember that the classic fairy tales are often dark and bloody: think of the original Grimm version of Cinderella, where the stepmother tells her daughters to cut off their toes to fit into the slipper. [Original versions of Red Riding Hood](#) from Germany and France are much more violent than Disney versions. The grandmother's blood is drained and poured into jars, and her flesh put on shelves. The wolf then tricks Red Riding Hood to drink and

eat what remains of her grandmother. Again, some readers might find the descriptions in *Red Hood* to be not to their taste. That does not mean that the book isn't suitable for young adults; it means it is not suitable for that particular young adult. And the school librarian can always assist in finding books that each student finds suitable and worth reading.

A [review from Common Sense Media](#) talks about the book this way: "This absorbing, gorgeously written novel both challenges and inspires readers. An early sex scene and extended descriptions of Bisou's first period may cause even strident feminists discomfort. But the underlying messages are that joyous sex between consenting teens is sometimes a healthy part of growing up and that menstruation is not inherently shameful. Readers are rewarded with lyrical prose and a magical story that affirms the power we can find in one another. Though trauma and threat of male violence is ever-present, it's inspiring to see the characters overcome their troubles."

One committee member added: "No one on the review committee approved of the book *carte blanche*, and we all grappled with the sexual content. But at the end of the day, the stories are necessary. If we are to raise young men and women to advocate for themselves - and to change the culture of rape and abuse, we can't just pretend it doesn't happen. We teach the brutality of many human flaws - war, slavery, discrimination - in hopes that we can call it into the light and put it to rest."

Several of the complainant's concerns remain. Illegal acts can be found in much of literature, as can descriptions of murder, death, and vulgar language, and all can be found in literature for young adults. When examining materials that are available to minors, the American Library Association quotes from [Erznoznik v. City of Jacksonville](#) in the [ALA Bill of Rights](#): "Speech that is neither obscene as to youths nor subject to some other legitimate proscription cannot be suppressed solely to protect the young from ideas or images that a legislative body thinks unsuitable for them. In most circumstances, the values protected by the First Amendment are no less applicable when government seeks to control the flow of information to minors."

In addressing the complaint of "vigilantism", the committee found the [BookPage.com review](#) to have a powerful take: "[Bisou] must use these gifts to protect other women from wolves—who are actually men and boys who've committed terrible acts of violence against women. The wolves will show no mercy, and neither must Bisou." Rather than "vigilantism", the young women are defending themselves from direct attack. The reviewer continues, "A graphic, visceral fantasy that doesn't pull its punches and often reads like a thriller, *Red Hood* depicts young women growing into their anger and developing a will to fight. 'It's not that we need more wolf hunters,' Bisou says, after she has killed her second wolf/boy. 'It's that we need men to stop becoming wolves.'" And indeed, this hits home in Ketchikan as well. One committee member noted that there are currently 58 sex offenders registered in Ketchikan. All of them are men.

The BookPage review concludes with, "I want to give this book to every teenager I know." The review committee recommends the book be retained on the KHS library shelves.

Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District

333 Schoenbar Rd. • Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

Ph. (907) 247-2116 Fax: (907) 247-3823

Michael Robbins, Superintendent •



February 21, 2024

Via email to: judges4@gmail.com

Deborah Simon
7865 S. Tongass Hwy
Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

Re: Notice of Superintendent's Decision on Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials ("Red Hood" by Elana Arnold)

Dear Dr. Simon:

This letter is the notice pursuant to Administrative Regulation 1312.2 from the Superintendent of the Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District regarding your request to have the book "Red Hood," written by Elana Arnold, withdrawn from use for all students.

The District's review committee received and reviewed the concerns you outlined in your request. The review committee acknowledges that "Red Hood" is a difficult book to read because it addresses the difficult issues of sexual abuse and sexual assault of young women. The review committee noted that the District is required to address these issues to prevent sexual abuse of students and teen dating abuse.

The review committee that students are engaging in sexual activity and the District must ensure it is providing accurate and meaningful materials which fully address students' lives. The review committee noted that the descriptions of menstruation and condom use in "Red Hood" are accurate and valuable. The review committee noted that "Red Hood" contains many conversations in which teen characters are engaged with supportive adults, which it noted is a "highly positive portrayal of child-parent" relationships.

One review committee member noted: "No one on the review committee approved of the book carte blanche, and we all grappled with the sexual content. But at the end of the day, the stories are necessary. If we are to raise young men and women to advocate for themselves - and to change the culture of rape and abuse, we can't just pretend it doesn't happen. We teach the brutality of many human flaws - war, slavery, discrimination - in hopes that we can call it into the light and put it to rest."

Deborah Simon

April 19, 2024

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I accept the recommendation of the review committee to retain "Red Hood" by Elana Arnold in the Ketchikan High School library collection. This book will not be retained in the library collection of any other schools in the District.

Upon receipt of this decision, you are entitled to bring your request, as well as this decision and the report of the review committee, to the School Board for consideration and final decision. If you wish to bring your request to the School Board, please notify me in writing of your wish to do so.

Sincerely,
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District

Michael Robbins
KGBSD Superintendent

Encl/as

cc: Rick Dormer, Principal, Ketchikan High School

March 26, 2024

Stephen Bradford, School Board President
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District
333 Schoenbar Rd.
Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

Re: Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials - *Red Hood*

Mr. Bradford:

On November 10, 2023 and again on November 30, 2023, I submitted to Principal Rick Dormer the attached E 1312.2 Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials regarding the novel, *Red Hood*, by Elana Arnold, a copy of which is currently located in the Ketchikan High School's library. On December 1, 2023, Mr. Dormer acknowledged receipt of same. On February 21, 2024, Superintendent Michael Robbins forwarded the attached denial of that request. On February 24, 2024, in response to my request for the names of those on the Review Committee and a copy of the Committee's report, Mr. Robbins declined to comply. On March 8, 2024, in response to my request for clarification on his denial, Mr. Robbins, however, forwarded the Library Review Committee's report, a copy of which is attached. I have yet to receive the names of the individuals who were on that committee. This is an important piece of information since, on at least one occasion, the personal opinion of an unnamed Committee member is used to support retention of the book.

Pursuant to Mr. Robbins' February 21, 2024 letter and current School Board policy, I am hereby appealing the superintendent's denial and requesting that the School Board make a final decision regarding reconsideration of *Red Hood's* placement in the Ketchikan High School's library.

- It is incomprehensible that a piece of literature the Library Review Committee itself finds to be a "difficult book to read, with intensely graphic description" would be considered as what AS 14.30.355 had in mind when it counseled schools to "provide training to help prevent the sexual abuse of children and teen dating abuse." Furthermore, quoting as proof of this fact the opinion of an independent book reviewer using its site as [self-professed "marketing opportunities for publishers"](#) hardly makes it so; and yet, over and over the Committee's report quotes other reviewers rather than the novel itself. Why?
- How can the Committee claim that a resource which graphically depicts sexual activity to an extent that makes the members themselves uncomfortable "support[s] 'students' personal needs and [enable[s]] them to make intelligent judgments in their daily lives"?"
- What are the "proper developmental guidelines" that a high school library's resources must observe in order to be judged "especially important in supporting 'students' personal needs and [enabling] them to make intelligent judgments in their daily lives"?"

- The Committee relies on the opinion of the school’s health teacher yet fails to (1) name that individual or (2) provide that teacher’s training and developmental education. Without this information at a minimum, that individual’s determination that *Red Hood* is “valuable” and “important” are without context and merit. As a trained and educated high school English Literature teacher myself, I wholeheartedly disagree that any piece of fiction, let alone a popular vs classical piece of literature, can provide any such realistic and nonfictional elements.
- The Committee compares the graphic nature of the original Grimm fairy tale version of “Little Red Riding Hood” to *Red Hood*, thereby showing this novel to be valuable. Please provide evidence that high schoolers in Ketchikan have read and studied the original Grimm fairy tale version of this story.
- In one sentence the Committee’s report states that some readers’ discomfort with this novel does not represent its merit for all readers, yet, in the very next paragraph it uses one organization’s opinion of the novel to prove its merit for every reader. This is both ironic and baffling.
- The Committee’s report cites an anonymous member’s sweeping yet unsubstantiated opinion of this novel that raises *Red Hood* to the level of a history textbook. Please provide the evidence that reading this novel will prevent sexual abuse in the same way that providing high school students with knowledge and instruction in historical events will prevent the same events from occurring in the future.
- The Committee’s report cites an excerpt from the American Library Association. Please provide evidence that the American Library Association is the governing body for decisions made by the Ketchikan High School. Additionally, please explain how this quote even applies to any statements I have made about *Red Hood*.
- In answer to the complaint of vigilantism, the Committee uses a quote from the same independent book reviewer mentioned in the first bullet point to say that the violent attacks depicted in *Red Hood* are of personal defense rather than vigilantism. In fact, the violent murder in this book is being committed by one young woman rather than each individual victim — the very definition of vigilantism. On another note, why use the opinion of a reviewer rather than direct evidence from the novel as proof of a particular point?
- In the penultimate paragraph of the Committee’s report, the Committee equates those murdered in the book with 58 of Ketchikan’s citizens. Does the Committee really believe these citizens should be hunted down and killed by someone similar to the young woman depicted in this novel?

I look forward to your consideration at a future School Board meeting.

Sincerely,

Deborah Simon, M.Ed.

cc: Keenan Sanderson, School Board Vice President
Nicole Anderson, School Board Clerk-Treasurer
Judy Guthrie, School Board Member
Tom Huette, School Board Member
Melissa O'Bryan, School Board Member
Katherine Tatsuda, School Board Member
Michael Robbins, Superintendent