

KETCHIKAN GATEWAY BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
AGENDA STATEMENT

No. 11 a.

MEETING OF January 24, 2024

Item Title:

NEW BUSINESS

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: Flamer, written by Mike Curato.

Reviewed By

Superintendent

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, Flamer, written by Mike Curato.

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, Flamer, 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 keep the book in the 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 the Superintendent's determination/recommendation

EXHIBITS ATTACHED

- Board Policy/Administrative Regulation 1312.20
- 12/28/23 Email
- Library Review Committee – Review and Recommendation
- Notice of Superintendent's Decision on Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials, "Flamer" by Mike Curato

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, Flamer, by Mike Curato."

Public Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials

BP 1312.20

PUBLIC COMPLAINTS CONCERNING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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

Public Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials

AR1312.20

PUBLIC COMPLAINTS CONCERNING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Note: The following regulation provides procedures for receiving, considering and acting upon complaints regarding instructional materials used by the district. All parts of the regulation, including specified timelines, may be modified as desired to reflect district practice.

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



Crystal Vail <crystal.vail@k21schools.org>

FW: Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials - January, 24, 2024 - Ketchikan High School Library Book - Flamer

1 message

stephen.bradford@k21schools.org <stephen.bradford@k21schools.org>

Fri, Jan 19, 2024 at 11:50 AM

To: Crystal Vail <crystal.vail@k21schools.org>

From: Prof. Deborah <judges4@gmail.com>

Sent: Thursday, December 28, 2023 4:54 PM

To: stephen.bradford@k21schools.org; keenan.sanderson@k21schools.org; nicole.anderson@k21schools.org; judy.leaskguthrie@k21schools.org; tom.heutte@k21schools.org; melissa.o'bryan@k21schools.org; katherine.tatsuda@k21schools.org

Cc: Michael Robbins <michael.robbins@k21schools.org>; Rick Dormer <Richard.Dormer@k21schools.org>

Subject: Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials - January, 24, 2024 - Ketchikan High School Library Book - Flamer

On September 28, 2023, I emailed a Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials regarding the Ketchikan High School library's book, *Flamer* to principal Rick Dormer. On October 14, 2023, Mr. Dormer responded that he had received that Request. On November 30, 2023, I emailed Mr. Dormer again, asking if there were any update on that Request, copying Superintendent Michael Robbins, his assistant Crystal Vail, and the Ketchikan High School librarian Caitlin Jacobson. Ms. Jacobson replied that the Review Committee had met and their response would soon be sent to Mr. Dormer. On December 22, 2023, Superintendent Robbins emailed me a letter dated December 21, 2023, stating that he intended to follow the Review Committee's recommendation to retain the book in the Ketchikan High School library. On December 23, 2023, I emailed Superintendent Robbins asking for a copy of the Review Committee's report and indicating that I would be bringing the Request to you, the School Board. On December 26, 2023, Mr. Robbins responded with a copy of the Review Committee's report dated November 30, 2023.

Accordingly, I will attend the School Board's January 24, 2024 meeting to appeal Superintendent Robbins' decision. It is unfortunate that this must wait yet another month, especially considering it has already been four months since the Request was filed, nearly twice the amount of time that I understand the policy specifies for this process. I am unable, however, to attend the Board's January 10, 2024 meeting because I am a Ketchikan Library Advisory Board member, and the Board will be meeting that evening.

In the interim, I am attaching all of the aforementioned correspondence for your convenience.

Prof. Deborah Simon, M.Ed.

2 attachments

To: Mr. Rick Dormer, Principal
Mr. Michael Robbins, Superintendent

From: Library Review Committee

RE: Complaint on *Flamer*

A review committee has met regarding the complaint about *Flamer* by Mike Curato. The complainant had several concerns about this book, specifically, about vulgar language, “gratuitous sexual innuendo”, bullying, and “suggestions of suicide”.

This book is a semi-autobiographical work relating the story of Aiden, a teen at summer camp the summer before high school begins. In its summary, a School Library Journal reviewer writes: “Verdict: Curato has created a beautiful story of a teen who must decide if he will force himself into the mold of what he thinks a “normal” boy is, or if he can allow himself to live life on his own terms. An essential book that shows readers that they are never alone in their struggles.”

(<https://www.slj.com/review/flamer#:~:text=VERDICT%20Curato%20has%20created%20a,never%20alone%20in%20their%20struggles.>)

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.*

It is the view of this committee that this book meets all of the above points. This work supports students' personal needs, and will encourage positive responses to adversity. In the face of difficult situations, the author shows the character growing in his ability to withstand bullying, and be more accepting of who he is. This book realistically depicts our pluralistic society and as it is written by a Filipino American (who was a visiting author in our public library and our schools in 2017); this book is a positive contribution to our local community.

It is undeniable that this book contains mature themes. The book includes racial slurs, curse words, and illustrations that suggest masturbation. The committee would strongly suggest that this is suitable for the intended audience - grades 9 and up. This is language heard in our hallways and off-campus, and is not in any way “gratuitous”, but in fact, is essential to the story. Committee members reflected that the use of racial slurs, in particular, can serve to combat the sense that teens have that they can say anything; that words don't hurt. In fact, the hurt the character Aiden feels from the words said to him show clearly that the words DO hurt. And we in Ketchikan have many students from the cultural background or sexual orientation of the character, and have, almost certainly, heard similar slurs at some point in their lives. How

affirming might it be for readers like this to know that someone else had suffered similar hurt? And for those readers who might have used a term like this, maybe even casually, not realizing the hurt caused? Might a reader learn something from this?

And is this not the purpose of education and literature? To learn about the world around us? And to humanize those that are not the same as “us”? And who, for that matter, is “us”? The world is not the same as it was 50 years ago. Our place here in Ketchikan is diverse, in multiple ways. Our School Board asks that we provide literature in our libraries that reflects our diverse community, and the value of those within that community.

One concern of the complainant is particularly important to address: the subject of suicide. The complainant writes that the book is a “promotion of depression, hopelessness, and suicide as coping mechanisms...”

According to our review committee members, this book does entirely the opposite of what the complainant suggests. Rather, this book shows how the character “gets to the point [of suicide], shows the cascade of events that play out, and shows how the character has the strength to overcome the experiences.” Curato himself writes about this in the book’s Afterward, and also includes organizations readers can contact if they need someone to talk to.

Furthermore, the Ketchikan High School has put in place a curriculum for all 10th graders on mental health. We are in our 4th year with the Teen Mental Health First Aid curriculum, taught during our Advisory period. This curriculum has been approved by our School Board.

Here is a brief summary of the Teen program, taken from their website: “Build a powerful community of teens ages 15-18 by teaching them how to support a friend or classmate with the evidence-based teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA) course. Adolescence is a time of critical change and development. It’s when mental health challenges may first emerge and may be the cause for falling grades, problems with close relationships and substance use. Young people will be prepared to provide support for their peers as well as better cope with mental health challenges themselves. tMHFA was brought to the United States by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing in partnership with Born This Way Foundation, and is tailored to the unique experiences and needs of young people.” For more information, see: https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/MHFA_Teen_Flyer.pdf.

It should be noted that many of the concerns addressed by the program are topics also addressed in *Flamer*. Issues of adolescence are challenging and complex, and literature can assist readers in understanding these issues.

In addition, the complainant writes, “Suicide can only be avoided by an inner courage which both the main character and the author had trouble developing, and some of those known to the author did not develop it at all, resorting, instead to suicide. Not all readers will be able to develop this inner confidence. Some may feel a failure all the more and attempt suicide because of their exposure to it in this book combined with their failure to find the strength needed to avoid it.”

This idea that the very act of talking about (or reading about) suicide can *cause* the suicide is not supported by evidence. A particular 2014 study is often cited when examining the impacts of talking directly about suicide. This study showed that talking about suicide, and by inference, *reading about it*, does not increase a person’s interest in committing suicide, and instead, by asking about it directly, a person can be guided toward help. ([Dazzi, T., Gribble, R., Wessely, S., & Fear, N. \(2014\). Does asking about suicide and related behaviours induce suicidal ideation? What is the evidence? Psychological Medicine, 44\(16\), 3361-3363. doi:10.1017/S0033291714001299](#))

One article on the tMHFA website addresses suicidal ideation this way: “A common misconception is that asking a person about suicide can “put the idea in their mind.” The

MHFA curriculum tells us this is not true. Rather than inspiring suicide, asking a person if they're considering suicide reassures them that there's someone who cares."

(<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2022/09/suicide-is-preventable-how-to-help-with-mental-health-first-aid/>)

And indeed, the care the author shows for his readers shines through.

This may not be a story for every teen, but it is a story that is vital to many teens. The review committee recommends this book be retained in the KHS library collection.

Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District

333 Schoenbar Rd. • Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

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

Michael Robbins, Superintendent •



January 19, 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 ("Flamer" by Mike Curato)

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 "Flamer" by Mike Curato withdrawn from all students.

The District's review committee received and reviewed the concerns you outlined in your request. The review committee has recommended retention of "Flamer" in the Ketchikan High School library collection. The review committee advises that this book supports students' personal needs and encourages positive responses to adversity. The review committee advises that this book "realistically depicts our pluralistic society" and notes that the book was written by a Filipino American who was a visiting author in the Ketchikan Public Library and District schools in 2017. A copy of the report of the review committee is enclosed.

I accept the recommendation of the review committee to retain "Flamer" 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.

Deborah Simon
January 19, 2024
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Sincerely,
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District

Michael Robbins
KGBSD Superintendent

Encl/as

cc: Rick Dormer, Principal, Ketchikan High School