

Not a full ban: School board president responds to removal of controversial books from district curriculum Tim Rockey Frontiersman.com

- Apr 24, 2020

PALMER — Mat-Su School Board President Tom Bergey responded to the controversy surrounding action the board took at the April 22 school board meeting.

The school board voted 5-2 to remove a list of five books — “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 — from the elective English curriculum in MSBSD in an amendment to the reading list. The board also voted to remove the New York Times Learning Network as a tool used for teacher resource.

The action did not call for a full ban of the books.

Bergey said that the school board will review one more reading list before the end of the year and reiterated that the books will remain in libraries around MSBSD, but that he felt the texts used in classrooms should be further vetted to prevent Equal Employment

Opportunity complaints and possible litigation against staff teaching the controversial text to students.

“I’ve been hearing a lot of hype, you know that the book has been banned and it hasn’t been banned. The books will still be available in the libraries. They are not subject to be removed from the district,” said Bergey.

Bergey said that the impetus for reviewing English materials began after the June 2019 confirmation of Jason Marvel as Wasilla High School Principal after a lengthy meeting in which dozens of members of the public emotionally shared their feelings, both positive and negative, about Marvel’s use of controversial books in class during his 17-year tenure as a teacher in the MSBSD. The board asked for an opportunity to review course materials, which typically cycle through review once every six years.

“These courses had been approved by the board already and a review of course material

was requested by the Board last year,” wrote MSBSD Public Information Officer Jillian Morrissey. “The English electives material went through a process this 2019-2020 school year including, but not limited to, a stakeholder survey, community survey and a council of educators (teachers, librarians, administrators, etc...) to review the course material. When this was complete, a recommendation for the course material was brought to the board.”

As the reading list came before the board on April 22, District 5 Member Ryan Ponder offered a motion to remove the five books and NYT teaching tool from MSBSD curriculum. District 2 Member Jim Hart brought up that some of the materials would generate a complaint if read in the workplace and should

not belong in the classroom. Ponder's motion passed with members Sarah Welton and Kelsey Trimmer voting against removal of the curriculum. Voting in favor of the amendment was Bergey, Hart, District 3 Member Ole Larson, Ponder and District 7 Member Jeff Taylor. The main motion for the English list passed unanimously.

"What piqued my interest was when a board member mentioned that the reading of certain sections of one of the books would generate an EEO complaint that could have merit in the workplace and that was that was where my line was crossed," said Bergey. "There was only one book that was mentioned that would cause an EEO violation so you know there's no reason without just a little bit of vetting or just going through the process so the process is objective instead of subjective that they would be ready to go to the classroom."

Bergey stressed that he cast his vote with a personal desire to make sure that guidance was provided to staff teaching in MSBSD schools that would prevent hazardous materials from entering the classroom. In a description of the five controversial books prepared by the MSBSD Office of Instruction, Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is described as sexually explicit including descriptions of sexual abuse and "anti-white" messaging. Bergey expressed that he wanted to prevent sanctions coming down from the Professional Teaching Practices Commission on teachers using Angelou's book in class specifically.

"With the Professional Teaching Practices Commission, their using a pornographic material in a classroom is a sanctionable event. So if you've got a book that could generate a workplace level EEO complaint then there is a good probability that if there were a Professional Teaching Practices complaint against the teacher using it, that that would also hold water," said Bergey. "Controversial topics should not be sidestepped, I mean not brushed under the rug. They're there. They're part of our society but it's how they are presented."

The school board held a meeting in executive session on Thursday to discuss the hiring of a new superintendent as current Superintendent Dr. Monica Goyette's contract is up at the end of the year. Due to the viral reaction to an inaccurate tweet sent from the Frontiersman Twitter account, which labeled the board's action as a ban rather than just the removal of the books from district curriculum, Bergey expects candidates for superintendent to be well versed on the issue as they interview for the vacant position.

"We will start up again in August with, hopefully we have a new superintendent by the first of July. We're in the hiring process. This is one of those items that's going to be high on their radar list coming in," said Bergey. "We need to make sure that all bases are protected and that's going to be one of the tests of the new administration when they get on is that procedures like this are going to start getting switched out."

Voicing concerns

While no one offered public comment on the agenda item as presented, Bergey notes that residents have up to one hour per meeting to voice their concerns on non-agenda items. Non-agenda item public comment can be provided up to 3 p.m., on the day of the next meeting on May 6. The board canceled their scheduled April 29 meeting. Bergey stressed the importance of parental and public involvement in the process.

“We should make sure that we do our due diligence all the way through and look at all the bases and have the parental step be the last one,” said Bergey. “When looking at the restrictive books, the controversial books you know, there needs to be a little bit more of a formalized litmus test that’s done.”

Bergey is an avid reader himself and of the five books that were removed from curriculum, he has read Heller and Fitzgerald’s novels. Bergey acknowledges that material can make people uncomfortable, but wants to ask questions about the necessity of the materials presented. Bergey said that to use controversial books in Valley schools, educators must ask if the educational concept presented in the text is valid, and will another book without such explicit content illustrate the same concept. Bergey said that if another book cannot convey the same valid educational concept and reading of a book makes students uncomfortable, the book must not possibly contain a hazard that would lead to a violation from the PTPC.

“It’s not that we are trying to go against, we want to push racism or sexual violence or anything like that under the rug. It is those materials we need to vet just a little bit more in a formal process that is accessible by the public,” said Bergey. “If that document was not acceptable in the workplace and we’re trying to emulate workplace values in the classroom, we’re sending a mixed message.”

Bergey was unsure why Ponder added the NYT teaching tool with the five controversial books that had been flagged. Ponder did not respond to request for comment by press time.

Taylor did not wish to be interviewed, but allowed for his post on Facebook to be shared.

What ban!

“These books are not banned! They are on bookshelves, they are in teachers’ libraries, they are available and could be recognized and recommended as great literary works. They could be discussed and written about. They are not banned...If we, as a community, want to make true change, it must begin in the home. The quality of our students’ education begins there. This is where a student learns to appreciate education. Parents have the primary responsibility to educate, and the freedom to direct, the education of their children,” said Taylor. “I applaud those who choose to read these books on their own accord. I applaud parents and caregivers who are involved in their student’s education. I applaud teachers who truly want to help students learn. If these are books that interest you, by all means, buy them, check them out, talk with people about them. That is the beauty of freedom.”

It is unclear if the books will be reintroduced on the school board agenda for discussion at the May 6 meeting. Bergey hopes to prevent litigation against MSBSD teachers by vetting the materials used in classrooms and working to preserve the parental right to engage in their child’s education.

“We just need to make sure that the vetting process covers all the bases and it’s out there for all to see,” said Bergey. “Hopefully we can get a process in to make sure that this never comes up again.”

Editor’s note: *The original Frontiersman story reporting the removal of English curriculum included two errors. The five books are not banned from MSBSD libraries, just removed from curriculum. Hart was incorrectly paraphrased as saying that both Fitzgerald and Angelou’s books would be described as more explicit than ‘PG-13.’ Hart said that only “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” by Maya Angelou was characterized as such.*

