

Great Books, Football, and the Huddle of Public Education

My name is Blake Livingston. I am a proud product of the valley, a veteran English teacher, coach and father of two young boys. Admittedly, the huddle of public education is imperfect. Yet, the school board's recent majority (aside from Mrs. Welton and Mr. Trimmer) vote to remove "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," "Invisible Man," "The Great Gatsby," "Catch- 22," "The Things They Carried," and "The New York Times" from our approved curriculum is a personal foul. The lack of transparency, disregard for proven educational policies, and flawed rationale for removing these books is a game changer.

The role of a school board is to make intelligent, informed decisions. There are instances where it is appropriate to remove a book from a list. While it is healthy to have robust discussions about what makes a great piece of literature and to weigh potential concerns, arbitrarily removing literature from our curriculum is a disservice to our entire community. Eliminating books solely based on previous challenges without any proper contextualization is staggeringly narrow-minded. Even the Bible, which is the most sacred of texts, could be challenged in this manner.

Every book has the potential for controversy. These books were selected by a curriculum council made up of educators and community stakeholders, which includes input from parents. These men and women have spent countless hours researching, discussing, and selecting a variety of appropriate, diverse texts for our district. Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, Tim O'Brien, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Joseph Heller are all critically acclaimed authors whose works are nearly universally recognized as important pieces of literature.

Our elected school board is tasked by the public to work collectively with both our district and community to best meet the educational needs of all of our students. I wonder if any opposing members paused to consider what our African American students and parents think now that both "Invisible Man" and "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" have been removed from our curriculum? Shouldn't we offer at least one recommended piece of literature in our district's American Literature course that defines the African American experience in the 20th century?

Books like these should absolutely be in our curriculum and classrooms. Our public school system is founded on preparing young men and women for college, vocational training, the armed forces, or any number of other viable options. As young adults, the majority of teenagers are more than ready to explore real life issues that are sometimes controversial. A safe, structured classroom environment is an appropriate setting to facilitate this process.

Unfortunately, life isn't always easy or smooth for all. The classroom offers a safe place for our students to responsibly explore and comprehend the complexity of the human experience, which can be simultaneously cruel and beautiful. Teachers act as facilitators, delving into history, cultural literacy, and varying life perspectives. Through shared inquiry, students

interpret, question, and analyze these complex texts. This process promotes growth and encourages intellectual thought. More importantly, our students are empowered to take the path towards becoming well-rounded, empathetic, independent thinkers, and productive citizens in our society.

Teachers and coaches are champions for young people. Mr. Lebron McPhail was my high school football coach and is an extraordinary man. He embraced the challenge of forging teenagers into great teams and taught invaluable life skills.

What I didn't realize as a teenager, is that Coach McPhail was equally adept at unifying all of our assistant coaches to share in his vision for the program as a whole. It is a minor miracle in retrospect: Coach Jack Forrester is legendary in his own right, while both Coach Randy Magner and Coach Rod Christensen deservingly belong in The Alaska Sports Hall of Fame for what they've accomplished in leading their own respective programs.

My point here is that winning conference championships, Potato Bowls, and the Integrity Bowl on the gridiron takes a clear vision and personal sacrifice (by both players and coaches) to do what is best for the team.

Our school board would gain a lot of yards if they were willing to hear and advocate for the majority voice of the people. Our community insists upon transparency, inclusion, and working collaboratively together to do what is best for our students.

In some ways, it is reminiscent of playing in the Integrity Bowl all those seasons ago. The stadium lights are blinding, the bleachers are overflowing with spectators, and the pressure is on to perform at the highest level. I believe that our school board's next play will be a defining moment for years to come.

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