

The power of a word is a power, that when used, cannot be taken back. It can lift, or destroy. It can unite, or divide. Thursday morning the world woke up to a word that has caused a storm that will last for some time. The local "Frontiersman News" tweeted a very irresponsible tweet that stated "The Mat-Su Borough School District School Board voted 5-2 to ban 5 books from the MSBSD schools.". This was shocking to everyone who read it, myself included.

"Ban" means to "officially or legally prohibit".

I want to say this very loudly. 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.

During the last school board meeting, curriculum for the 20-21 school year was presented. As requested in a prior board meeting, books listed in the curriculum, that were labeled by the administration, as "controversial", were listed, and the reasons for the controversial listing was shared. These books and the reasons given for being controversial are:

"I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings": Sexually explicit material, such as the sexual abuse the author suffered as a child, and its "antiwhite" messaging. Angelou's book, which is part autobiography, part literary fiction, details many real-life events the author experienced from her early life through adulthood. Many of these recollections have led to the book being challenged or banned.

"The Great Gatsby": Language and sexual references

"Catch-22": There are a handful of racial slurs, the characters speak with typical "military men" misogyny and racist attitudes of the time. There are scenes of violence both hand to hand and with guns, and violence against women

"The Invisible Man": Language, rape and incest.

"The Things They Carried": Profanity and sexual references

Honestly, my initial thought was "why The Great Gatsby?" I have not read the others. Regardless, it was listed and therefore part of the group. I proposed a public question about why these books, that even administration has labeled as "controversial", needed to be part of our curriculum. In my mind, I seriously wondered "are there no other great literary pieces that promote the same critical thinking without descriptive depictions of things such as rape or incest? And at what point should boundaries be drawn?" I followed up my question with a statement that I wish I had not made. I stated "I wish they were gone". If words could be taken back, I would take these five words back and say instead, "I would prefer these books be replaced with other, less descriptive, books". A debate ensued with The Board and Administration. In the end, it was decided by a 5-2 vote to remove these books from the approved reading list under English 3 or American Literature. It was not to ban these books.

As a side note; because of the mandates related to COVID-19, public interaction regarding this topic was difficult. While the public, who were watching via live stream, could have called in, the difficulty and lack of public interest in the board meeting did not facilitate a quick public response. This may need to be revisited.

The reasons each board member voted the way they did are mixed and many. I voted to remove these books from the reading list to give parents more freedom, control, and involvement in determining what their children read and give parents responsibility in the formation of their student's thoughts and knowledge. I also voted to remove these books to protect teachers from possible issues related to teaching controversial curriculum to an audience that could use these books in a way that would be harmful to the teacher.

I truly believe and have stated: "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. When parents are unable or unwilling to fulfill this responsibility, we as a community have a moral obligation to assist."

I have no doubt that these books will be read more in the near future than they have been in the recent past. There are even rewards being offered, by private entities, for those who read them. 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.