

May 11, 2015

Parental Rights and The Kite Runner Controversy

By Lisa Baldwin, Former Buncombe County school board member, parent and student advocate at www.facebook.com/buncombestudentsfirst

Buncombe's School Board Policy 3210 allows parents to question supplemental materials used in the classroom. And that's exactly what I did when my child told me he would be reading 'The Kite Runner' in 10th grade Honors English class instead of the time-honored classic, 'All Quiet on the Western Front'. 'The Kite Runner' is a dark and disturbing adult fiction novel set in war-torn Afghanistan and has been frequently challenged by concerned parents for its sexually explicit content. The American Library Association reported that it's one of the most frequently challenged books of the 21st century.

Interestingly, when the teacher and administrators met with me, no lesson plans were presented nor were any verbal explanations given on exactly how the book in question, The Kite Runner, would be used in the classroom. The low reading level (6th grade), mature adult themes (graphic homosexual rapes of children, extreme cruelty and violence, murder, profanity demeaning to women, and a suicide attempt) didn't matter to the teacher, only that the book was about Afghanistan. The teacher had not disclosed to parents at the curriculum fair or the spring open house that this book would be taught during the semester. During the open house I asked the teacher how she was incorporating the common core standards into the English Language Arts curriculum. She did not tell me that she planned to teach this common core novel in place of the classic my other three children had studied in 10th grade Honors English class.

I expressed concerns that the book description on the "opt-out" form didn't fully disclose the adult themes nor did it ask parents to sign an "opt-in" form/permission slip. The issue here is "full disclosure" and the opportunity for parents to "opt-in" in regards to this and any book's content. An "opt-out" form without specific disclosure does not empower parents. Such a procedure speaks to the negligence of this system. When dealing with explicit sexual content, not only do the parents of minors have the right to know, the school system has the legal responsibility to inform. The system failed in this responsibility from both a legal and ethical perspective.

It is well-known that "opt-out" forms remain in students' backpacks or never make it home. Last year a parent publicized this problem during the school board's public comment period. He had not received the "opt-out" form for his child's sex education class and requested that "opt-in" forms be sent home when sensitive topics are to be taught in school.

Parents do have the right to "control" what their "minor" child reads and asking for such disclosure and an "opt in" process is well within parent rights. It is quite apparent who has "control issues" - our public school administrators and local media. They continue to demonize any and all who question "their" position. After all, it was the Reynolds High principal who took my objection to the Asheville Citizen-Times.

The teacher did not fully disclose the deeply disturbing elements of the story to parents: the detailed, graphic description of an older boy raping a younger boy, the rape of a child by a man, a suicide attempt related to the child rape, cruelty, murder and profanity demeaning to women. The child rape is the central theme of the book, not just an isolated incident. How can students, "if they wish", do as the teacher suggested, skip "a key scene, critical to the plot"?

The rape scenes might trigger emotional, traumatic or painful memories and disturbing mental images for some of the students. Even colleges have "trigger warnings" at the top of the syllabus to alert students to disturbing content; at least one college provided a "safe space" for students when a controversial topic became overwhelming for them. Is the teacher qualified to handle potential psychological issues?

Everyone needs to understand that sexual abuse as a child carries over into adulthood and parenthood and impacts any children in that situation. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse. Over the course of their lifetime, 28% of U.S. youth ages 14 to 17 had been sexually victimized.

However, I tried to offer a compromise but the principal rejected it. I suggested that the class continue to read the classic, 'All Quiet on the Western Front', comparing and contrasting the World War I soldiers' experience with that of modern warriors in Afghanistan/Iraq, using appropriate excerpts from 'The Kite Runner' and other books. Reading the classics helps us understand the past, preventing us from making the mistakes of our predecessors. Critical and analytical thinking skills are developed when reading more complex works.

Instead, the principal suspended the book from classroom instruction (it is still available in the school library) until these issues can be sorted out. No books were banned or censored. The school's Media Technology Advisory Committee will review the objection and make a decision. If I disagree with their decision, I can appeal to a district-wide committee.