Dear Superintendent Guthrie,

As a coalition of organizations dedicated to promoting freedom of expression in public school systems, we write to express our concern about a recent incident in Carroll County Public Schools (CCPS) in which teachers were told to remove posters because a complainant insisted they were “political” and “anti-Trump.” Rather than ensuring political neutrality within the school system, the removal will stifle discussion of an important social issue and imperil any future discussions of similar socially prominent topics.

The posters are entitled “We The People” and were created by the prominent street artist Shepard Fairey. They depict American women—including Muslim-American and African-American women—in the colors of the American flag. They contain captions such as “We The People Defend Dignity” and “We The People Stand With Each Other.” Mr. Fairey created the posters for “a nonpartisan campaign dedicated to igniting a national dialogue about American identity and values through public art and story sharing.” Several teachers hung the posters in their classrooms, but the administration ordered their removal after a staff member complained that they were “anti-Trump.”

Schools do have an interest in preventing teachers from engaging in partisan political activities while on the job, as specified in CCPS Policy GBI. CCPS would be perfectly justified in preventing teachers from creating displays that strongly favor or oppose a candidate, party, officeholder, or legislative proposal and thus create an impression that the school endorses a particular partisan political position.

However, the simple act of displaying the “We The People” posters does not constitute partisan political advocacy. The images do not advocate for or against President Trump, the Republican Party, or their policies, nor do they call on viewers to take political action in support of or opposition to a specific cause.

On the contrary, the posters directly advance the goals of CCPS Policy IGAA by emphasizing the experiences of minority women and promoting values such as heritage and diversity. They encourage viewers to think critically the complex relationships between self-identity as a minority and self-identity as an American.

By electronic mail: shguthr@carrollk12.org

February 28, 2017
In order to encourage civic education, it is crucial that our schools promote critical thinking about these types of social questions. Not only does the removal of the posters impede such discussions, but it also sets a dangerous precedent that risks stifling dialogue about other sociopolitical issues.

By removing the “We the People” posters, CCPS has demonstrated to teachers that discussion of highly topical issues such as citizenship is subject to censorship if anyone complains of bias or a failure to show “both sides.” Out of fear of discipline, teachers may choose to avoid such conversations, dealing a blow to civic education. The losers, as always, will be the students.

We hope that CCPS will allow its teachers to exhibit both the “We the People” posters and other relevant, thought-provoking displays. Doing so is by no means incompatible with remaining politically neutral.

Please let us know whether we can be of any further assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship