By electronic mail: c/o Mike Bellm, Building Principal (mbellm@altonschools.org)

October 12, 2017

Mark Cappel, Superintendent
Alton School District
1854 E. Broadway
Alton, IL 62002

Dear Superintendent Cappel,

As organizations concerned with the freedom to read, the integrity of the public education system, and the application of First Amendment law and principles in public institutions, we are writing with serious concern regarding the removal of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* from Alton High School classrooms. We learned that the book was removed in response to a single complaint and before the review committee had issued its recommendation. **We urge the school to clarify its policies and specify that a book will be kept in the classroom or curriculum while it is under review.** As organizations with years of experience in disputes over school materials, we also want to share some considerations that we hope the Committee keeps in mind when determining the fate of the book.

It is our understanding that English teachers at Alton High School have taught *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the 10th grade curriculum, notifying parents prior to the start of each term and offering alternate texts to those who do not wish their children to read the book. This year, in response to a parent's objections to the book, the English department has removed the book from the classroom, pending a committee review of whether or not to remove it from the curriculum entirely.

Removing a book while it is being reviewed effectively imposes a heckler's veto on the classroom, letting a single complaint determine what materials can be taught. Such a practice undermines the entire review process. Indeed, the review process may not be completed before the time allotted to read a book in the classroom has passed. As a result, a whole group of students would be deprived of the opportunity to read and discuss a particular challenged book in an educational context. Most book challenge policies thus include clear instructions to keep challenged books on the curriculum (and where applicable, the library) until the review process has been concluded.

**In considering the book, we urge the review committee to keep in mind that removing any book on the basis of a few subjective complaints not only undermines educational goals but also raises serious First Amendment concerns.**
Pursuant to Alton Community Unit School District Policy 6:260, decisions about instructional materials should be made on purely educational grounds: the “primary objective” in selecting instructional materials “is to implement, enrich, and support the educational program of the school.” *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is an award-winning and critically acclaimed young-adult novel that is widely taught across the country. Among other awards, it has won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature (2007), the Book Sense Book of the Year Children’s Literature Honor Book (2008), the American Indian Youth Literature Award (2008), and the Pacific Northwest Book Award (2008). *USA Today* said the book is “sure to resonate and lift spirits of all ages for years to come,” and *Booklist* praised the novel’s ability to help teens, noting “younger teens looking for the strength to lift themselves out of rough situations would do well to start here.”

Books like *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* have legitimate educational value that can only be appreciated by reading the entire work. Citing passages out of context cannot be used as an argument to exclude the book from the curriculum. Otherwise, great and widely taught works like *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Catcher in the Rye* would be excluded from the school curriculum. Schools that fail to teach literary works of this magnitude hurt their students.

Removing the book from the classroom in response to a few complaints, especially when an alternative text can be offered instead, also raises First Amendment concerns by privileging the concerns of a few complainants over those of parents who want their child to read the book. As courts have observed, no parent has the right “to tell a public school what his or her child will or will not be taught.” *Blau v. Fort Thomas Public School District*, et al., 401 F.3d 381, 395 (6th Cir. 2005). Otherwise, schools would be forced to “cater a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreements with the school’s choice of subject matter.” *Brown v. Hot, Sexy and Safer Productions, Inc.*, 68 F.3d 525, 534 (1st Cir. 1995).

On a more practical level, removing *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* from the classroom will encourage parents to demand the removal of other books, which will burden district officials and review committees. Worse, it may force teachers to second-guess their selections of reading material and choose books because they are less likely to provoke complaints, rather than for their educational value and literary merit. The losers here will be, as always, the students.

Decisions about instructional materials should serve all students in Alton. This can best be accomplished with decisions made on sound educational grounds by educational experts, such as teachers and librarians. Policy 6:260 affirms this.

We hope that the Review Committee will recommend that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* remain in classrooms at Alton High School. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can be of any further assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Chris Finan, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
Millie Davis, Director
Intellectual Freedom Center
National Council of Teachers of English

Dan Cullen, Senior Strategy Officer
American Booksellers for Free Expression

Sofia Castillo, Staff Attorney
Free Expression Advocacy
Association of American Publishers

Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
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Lin Oliver, Executive Director
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Fatima Shaik, Co-Chair
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James LaRue, Director
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Cc: Mike Bellm, Building Principal
Kayla Kuehn, English Division Chair