May 13, 2019

Dr. Michael Gill, Superintendent
Hanover County Public Schools
200 Berkley Street
Ashland, VA 23005

Sent via Electronic Mail to: mgill@hcps.us

Dear Dr. Gill,

We are a collective of organizations dedicated to defending young people’s freedom to read, including the freedom to read stories about LGBTQ characters and history. We are writing concerning recent media reports of controversy around Hanover County students’ freedom to read PRIDE: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag by Rob Sanders. We want to support you in protecting your students’ right to express and learn from diverse perspectives.

According to public reports, Principal Keck removed the book from a Henry Clay Elementary second-grade classroom and criticized the teacher for exercising “poor judgement” after one parent complained it made her daughter “question her Christian faith.” While parents can choose books for their own children based on personal beliefs, public educators have a constitutional responsibility not to make viewpoint-based decisions.

We hope you will continue to make PRIDE: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag available to students who wish to read it. Should you consider the book for your core curriculum, we hope you will convene a committee, as per Policy 6-5.6 and consider the attached guidelines for viewpoint-neutral review. Ultimately, we hope you will support your teachers and work together to preserve intellectual freedom in Hanover County classrooms.

Books that honor LGBTQ histories and narratives are disproportionately censored in schools, chilling LGBTQ voices in the community. Such censorship stigmatizes an already marginalized community and is especially harmful to LGBTQ youth who face serious threats to their mental and physical health. Classrooms should be welcoming spaces where students can ask questions and express their own thoughts, trusting that their teachers will be ready to guide them towards deeper understanding and tolerance towards those who are different from them.

Board Policy 6-5.6 allows teachers to “enrich and support curriculum objectives” with supplemental texts, which “do not require the prior approval of the principal or the principal’s designee.” In this case, a teacher used Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag to teach her students profound lessons about human rights activism and LGBTQ equality. In addition to telling an important civil rights history and promoting civic engagement, this important book teaches values enshrined in the Hanover County Code of
Conduct, like “recognizing the importance of the dignity and worth of each individual” and “contributing to a climate of mutual respect for all.” Good Reads describes this biography of the first openly gay elected official and his fight for equality as an ‘undertold story of love, hope, equality, and pride.’

We encourage you to consider the entire book - not just the controversial elements - and how its messages might enrich your students.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further guidance. Thank you.

With warm regards,

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

Mary Rasenberger, Executive Director
The Authors Guild

David Grogan, Director
American Booksellers for Free Expression Committee

Fatima Shaikh, Co-Chair
PEN Children’s and Young Adult Books

Karen Loewy, Senior Counsel
Lambda Legal

Robt Seda-Schreiber, Chief Activist
Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice

Cc:
Hanover County School Board
c/o Kate M. Brown
Executive Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent
Clerk of the School Board
200 Berkley Street