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February 3, 2025

Dr. Renee Palazzo, Superintendent  
Glocester School District  
91 Anan Wade Road  
Glocester, RI 02857

VIA MAIL AND EMAIL

Dear Superintendent Palazzo:

We were recently apprised by teacher union representatives of a controversy in your school district over the circulation of books at Fogarty Memorial School. Because we believe this dispute raises important issues of academic freedom, parental rights, and First Amendment values, I am writing to strongly urge you to reconsider the instructions you have given to the school's librarians to catalog books by "age appropriateness" and to monitor students' reading choices. We believe that, however unintentionally, your directives establish a troubling precedent that can send a chilling message, encouraging censorship efforts that undermine basic pedagogical values.

We understand this dispute arose when the parent of a young child at the elementary school complained that her son had taken a book out of the school library that contained themes she considered to be age-inappropriate for him. In response, according to the union representatives, you called on the school librarians, as initial steps, to "work toward ensuring students are checking out age appropriate books" and to "work with [a software cataloging system] to identify a way to group your inventory by age." While we fully respect the rights of parents to have a say in the books that their own elementary school children take out of the school library, your requests go far beyond that reasonable goal. Instead, these directives create innumerable practical and policy problems for librarians seeking to abide by and uphold their professional standards and, perhaps more importantly, they impose arbitrary and artificial barriers for children seeking to expand their horizons and read challenging books.

For any number of reasons, requiring librarians to limit children to checking out only "age-appropriate" books is a fraught – indeed, an impossible – task for them. While publishers may often suggest a recommended age range for any particular book, it remains just that – a range and a recommendation. It can't be anything more than that in light of the extremely varied reading, comprehension, and experiential level of children. Parents themselves will have widely divergent views on what is appropriate reading material for their children, and it is unmanageable to give this supervisory and determinant role to librarians. Indeed, it is completely contrary to their mission as librarians – and to the mission of a school library. It would be even more inappropriate to assign such a task to other public employees or officials.

Such a policy also has the unfortunate effect of setting a lowest-common-denominator reading standard for children, limiting a precocious student from seeking out challenging material based solely on their age or grade. Reading habits often become ingrained at the elementary school level, and a book-grading system that stifles such a good habit is anathema to “creat[ing] and sustain[ing] a high-quality learning environment,” as the school district’s philosophy intones.

Relying on age or grade to determine whether a student should be able to take out a book may often miss the mark for another reason, exemplified by the instance that has prompted your directives. That is because the age recommendations of publishers and others may be based on the book’s expected reading level, not its subject matter, and respected sources often end up with different recommendations. Those differences are not significant when they serve as suggestions, but they take on much greater weight when they are used to restrict access.

It’s worth emphasizing that, as far as we know, the librarians have no objection to accommodating parents who advise them of books – whether by title, genre, or recommended reading level – they do not want their children to take out. We further understand that the school’s librarians have offered to share with parents a link to the library’s book collection and make them aware of their ability to flag books they do not wish their children to bring home. But anything that goes beyond this individualized approach, and that seeks to impose broad standards that affect the ability of *all other* children to read certain books, does a disservice to the First Amendment, other parents’ rights, and, just as crucially, to the goal of any school in encouraging curiosity and vibrant reading habits in their students.

In short, parents of elementary school students should have a mechanism to make restrictions on their own child’s reading habits known, but no student should otherwise be limited from taking out a book that professional librarians have deemed suitable.<sup>1</sup> We therefore urge you to reconsider the obligations you have imposed on the school’s librarians and instead adopt more individually focused ones such as those mentioned above. Of course, if you believe we have misconstrued the limited information we have about this situation, I welcome being corrected. Thank you in advance for considering our views, and I look forward to hearing back from you about them.

Sincerely,



Steven Brown  
Executive Director

cc: Tammy Strik, Principal  
Patricia Dubois, Assistant Superintendent  
Cindy Joyce, Chair, Gloucester School Committee  
Crystal Bergantine, Assistant Executive Director/UniServ, NEARI

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<sup>1</sup> As an aside, we were apprised of the book title that generated this controversy and note from reviews that it touches upon some serious topics, such as drug use and underage drinking, that a parent might wish to shield their young child from. But it does not denigrate a parent’s decision in that regard for us to note that this type of conduct is something that some very young children in the state do indeed witness and confront in real life.