

September 19, 2012

Dr. Jeffrey Schumann
Superintendent
Enfield School District
27 Shaker Rd
Enfield, CT 06082



Dear Dr. Schumann,

We are writing to express our concern over the removal of the graphic novel *Sidescrollers* (Oni Press) from high school summer reading lists in the Enfield School District. We are concerned both with the merits of the removal of the book from the list, and with the procedures the district followed in taking this action.



As we understand it, the District requires a written request for reconsideration, which triggers a review of the challenged material by a committee to evaluate the merits of the material and make a recommendation to the Board of Education. None of these steps was taken in the present case. The ban was triggered by a verbal complaint from a person who is not even the parent of a child in the school. The District's policy contemplates challenges only by parents. It states that "no parent nor group of parents has the right to negate the use of educational resources for students other than his/her own child." (6163.1a) (Emphasis added.) This is a reasonable restriction, since it allows complaints to be resolved by providing alternative assignments, rather than restricting the access of all students because of the concerns of some parents. In the case of the summer reading list, five alternatives were already offered.



In removing the book, you have allowed the vocal complaints of one resident — not even a parent—not only to dictate what texts student may read and discuss but to undermine the judgment of your professional staff. The teachers of Enfield and Enrico Fermi high schools have been compiling summer reading lists based on professional reviews and the opinions of Media Specialists without controversy for years. *Sidescrollers* has been an item on the reading list for several years, since the graphic novel category was introduced.



Sidescrollers, Matt Loux's popular graphic novel about three slacker friends was named one of the Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens in 2008 by the American Library Association. The book's anti-bullying and anti-drinking message is delivered in a way that teens find organic rather than preachy,



The Kids' Right to Read Project is a joint effort of The National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, with the support of the Association of American Publishers and the Comic book Legal Defense Fund

through dialogue that approximates the way these characters would really speak to one another. For that reason, it speaks to young people—and specifically to students who might be reluctant readers—in a way that more sanitized texts might not.

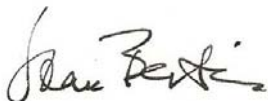
As public officials, school boards are bound by the obligation to adhere to constitutional principles. School officials “may not remove books from library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to ‘prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.’” *Board of Education v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 872 (1982)(plurality opinion). The failure to follow the district’s own procedures and the unwarranted removal of the book raise serious due process and First Amendment concerns. The proposal to create a system to review texts in the future for summer reading does nothing to address these serious concerns. It remains to be seen whether such a system, if implemented, adheres to constitutional standards, which require that the selection of materials be based solely on educationally-sound criteria. If instead the purpose is to rate or evaluate books based on whether they contain “controversial” content, that will raise not only additional constitutional concerns, but also questions about the nature and quality of the education students receive.

For your information, we suggest you refer to "The Student's Right to Read," a guideline established by the National Council of Teachers of English and available online at: <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoreadguideline>. In addition, NCAC offers an online Guide to the First Amendment in Schools, available at: <http://ncac.org/education/schools/index.cfm>. We hope these materials will be useful to you and others involved in this discussion.

We strongly urge you rescind your ban on *Sidescrollers*. Those who object to this book are entitled to their view, but they may not impose it on others. They have no constitutional right to restrict students’ access to a book because it conflicts with their personal values. We urge you to stand by the principle that is so essential to individual freedom, democracy, and a good education: the right to read, inquire, question, and think for ourselves.

If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



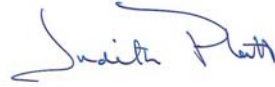
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cc: Anne MacKiernan, Chief Academic Officer
Kevin Fealy, Jr., Member, Enfield Board of Education
Tina LeBlanc, Member, Enfield Board of Education
Vincent M. Grady, Vice Chairman, Enfield Board of Education
Timothy Neville, Chairman, Enfield Board of Education
Joyce Hall, Member, Enfield Board of Education
Jennifer Rancourt, Member, Enfield Board of Education
Charles L. Johnson III, Member, Enfield Board of Education
Donna Szewczak, Secretary, Enfield Board of Education
Peter Jonaitis, Member, Enfield Board of Education