



October 6, 2017

## Open Letter Regarding Dixie District Schools' Violation of Intellectual Freedom

The Florida Association for Media in Education (FAME) is extremely concerned regarding the administrative directive from Superintendent Mike Thomas regarding instructional materials, dated September 8th.

FAME is the state professional organization for library media specialists in the state of Florida. We provide support, advocacy, professional development, and an annual conference for our members, who are making a substantial difference in Florida schools by changing students' lives through their library media centers. FAME is also an affiliate of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), which is a division of the American Library Association (ALA). As such, we believe strongly in intellectual freedom, which is defined on ALA's website as "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored."

Superintendent Thomas' administrative directive to ban all literature containing subject matter or language that *he* deems unacceptable is in direct violation of the principles of intellectual freedom that our libraries are committed to upholding. Additionally, he is in violation of his own district's policies concerning instructional materials. The Dixie District Schools policy states: (1) The District curriculum shall be determined by: (a) Student performance standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessment tests; (b) Students' needs as determined by studies and surveys; (c) Continuous evaluation of curriculum effectiveness in meeting students' needs in the District; and, (d) Florida Statutes, State Board of Education rules and the School Board. According to our research, no legal provisions were voted upon by the board OR discussed by the community which he so casually cites as the driving force behind the decision to ban curricular materials. If anyone in the community had a concern about a particular title, they had the option to challenge that title according to district policy. It is best practice to have specific procedures regarding book challenges; however, one district administrator, Superintendent Thomas, has decided to ignore that best practice, the policies of his own district, and the tenants of intellectual freedom which educators hold so dear. It is important that the board follows statutory rulemaking in development of a policy on instructional materials that is consistent with state law and applicable case law.

Time and time again, legal precedent has come down on the side of free expression. "If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable." Texas v. Johnson, 491 U. S. 397, 414 (1989).

It is the sincere hope of the Florida Association for Media in Education that Superintendent Thomas and or the school board of Dixie District Schools will immediately rescind the administrative directive previously issued regarding instructional materials. Not only does it violate the district's own policies, violate the curriculum policy of the Department of Education, but it is not in the best interest of the students of the state of Florida. If we expect students to grow into well-rounded, empathetic, intelligent, and creative adults who can contribute to our society in healthy ways, we must not smother their exposure to great literature, diverse ideas, and various forms of expression.

We are available to support library media specialists and their students during this time and will continue to monitor the situation closely. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us if we may be of service in the effort to uphold intellectual freedom for the students of Dixie District Schools. We are also available to Dixie District Schools to consult and or train regarding issues of intellectual freedom and would be happy to help them create and enforce policies that do not violate students' rights.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth Zdrodowski".

Elizabeth Zdrodowski, MA Ed.  
FAME President



