**My Experience with the Book Review**

An outstanding family in our community known for compassionate service, operates a charity providing thousands of free meals year round for people in need or the less fortunate. **See attached link for Green Street Catering.** They had a student at Watauga High School in the 10th grade English Honors course. The teacher for the course assigned *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. The parents filed to challenge the book because it was unsuitable for the age group, not age-appropriate. I was not involved in the process at this juncture. They went through two rounds of review with no resolution that would allow equal educational opportunity for their child and others. An appeal was filed with the Watauga County Board of Education. After this went on for months, the controversy got my attention. I read the book.

I do not desire to rehash the incessant use of sexually explicit material in the book. Yet, sex acts with a dead person, two teens taking turns on an older prostitute, and the graphic molestation of a six year old girl, along with over 50 other sexual references or sexually explicit descriptions, all in graphic detail, did not seem age-appropriate for the flourishing of 10th graders. The book selection divided a community. It should have been resolved within the school through collegiality and cooperation.

Another problematic aspect that the community discovered during this process was that students were denied equal educational opportunity. A student was required to read the book if they wanted 1. equal in-class instruction, 2. equal in-class discussion, 3. equal in-class informed participation, 4. equal in-class opportunities for the student to show proficiency to the teacher (grader), and 5. equal opportunity for class attendance. If the student or parent somehow became familiar with the degree of vulgarity in the book, and asked for an alternative book, the student was relegated to the hallway or another room, ostracized and marginalized.

No attempt was made to ban the book. The request was made to allow choices for the student while remaining in the classroom. Name calling and intimidation ensued from activist groups who apparently believe all books are age-appropriate and should never be subject to reasonable review for age-appropriateness, whatever the circumstances. In this day and age, civil discourse between those of different positions is a virtue. Stirring up the masses by calling the parents book banners and censors was unreasonable and misleading, even if intimidation works sometimes.

You noted you like to seek the truth. This next fact is critical. The fact is the community of parents requested a compromise, such as providing an option, a choice among books, without a student being removed from the classroom. The collegial option could have been reading circles with the choice of two books like other teachers had used, book options in summer reading, a book club, other recommended reading, having two different courses with different book options, library access, or other creative solutions. These compromises were rejected.

From a micro level view, a key fact is that another teacher at the high school had utilized reading circles with two book options successfully. From a macro level view, there are over 21,000 public high schools in the country. The teacher advocating the book found 19 schools from California to Carolina that used this book. Community representatives communicated with these few schools using the book to determine how the book was utilized. In 17 of 19 of the schools, the book was a choice or optional among many books. For example, one school provided 1 of 7 choices for summer reading, another provided 1 of 132 choices for summer reading, 1 of 59 choice in summer reading, 1 in 4 choice for classroom use, 1 of 2 choice in classroom use, and the lists goes on. See attached chart disclosing choices at schools. This disclosure of the most common practice for schools, allowing choices, should have ended the controversy. Students should have been provided an equal educational opportunity and allowed to remain in the classroom.

Another reality is that LEA’s have the constitutional right to monitor, oversee, manage and restrict certain behaviors and speech within schools to maintain order and safety. For example, Watauga High School (WHS) requires principal and parental notification and approval for PG-13 or R video resources. WHS policy does not allow students to possess obscene literature. Public displays of affection are restricted in school out of respect for the community. Inappropriate language could result in suspension under the Student Handbook policy. WHS has extensive content filtering on the laptops each student possessed. Pre-game music could not contain violent and sexual lyrics. Coaches are not permitted to use profane language. Books selected by a teacher could include all of these and more. At the time of the challenge, any book was fair game for 10th grade students as no accountability or review structure was in place.

With no standard of review for age-appropriateness, the individual teacher’s tolerance for obscenity, vulgarity, violence, and sexually explicit material in novels became the community standard. Parents were shocked, stunned and unaware. Critical thinking would have warranted thought on whether the horrid, dark, abusive scenes described in vivid, graphic and descriptive terms could trigger memories or emotions and re-victimize a student who had been abused. Or, how did the incessant sexual activity in the book, and the images created in the mind by avid readers, impact adolescents. Many psychologists, physicians, and counselors, discussed a multitude of negative effects.

Allende’s gift for the written word actually supports the case for making the book optional and giving student’s choices. She wrote with vivid, graphic, descriptive detail. The scenes invoked the emotions, physical reactions. Studies show avid readers create images in the mind. Clear images of these horrid scenes do not appear to be healthy. Was selecting and using this book worth the potential impact on 10th grade students? Is it the kind of messaging we want to convey to young men as to how they relate to women in this age of sexual violence? I may be wrong but it seems like advocates for public education would want to present and operate schools in a positive public light. Controversial and unnecessary book selections for 15 year-olds is not likely to do this.