

Update – English Language Arts (ELA) Secondary Curriculum

Parents/Guardians,

This is yet another long letter from the superintendent, but I feel the matter warrants the length. PLEASE READ THE ENTIRE LETTER. It was brought to my attention Monday afternoon that there is concern with curriculum programs being piloted within our secondary schools. May I first state that neither myself nor any member of our staff would ever deliberately use inappropriate material to educate our children. In this context, I am using the term inappropriate materials to refer to literature that contains pornographic content. Please understand, we do use some classic works such as “Romeo and Juliet” which some might feel includes content that is inappropriate. I will be the first to admit that I have not read every novel or piece of literature used within our classrooms. However, I do know an amazing group of individuals who have read those pieces of literature, our teachers.

When I became aware of this concern, I immediately reached out to meet with our teachers so that I could better understand what was taking place. I met with the English Language Arts department at Mountain View Middle School Tuesday during the late morning. I asked them about what was being taught and used in their classroom. I very specifically asked them if they used any material that could be perceived as inappropriate in nature. Their answer was no. I followed up with the question that I had been informed that some of the titles in the supplemental libraries did contain inappropriate materials from my perspective and had they used any of that supplemental material. I was informed that they had not used any of the supplemental materials. I was informed that to their knowledge students did not have access to the full content in the supplemental libraries unless the teacher assigned them to use that content. I was also informed that in order to gain access to that content the district would need to pay for that access, unless the work is in the “public domain”. To my knowledge, the titles with inappropriate content are not within the public domain. The meeting was an amazing experience where I was reminded about the incredible individuals we have teaching our children. Imperfect, of course, but amazing nonetheless.

Due to the freshmen/senior service day and the sophomore/junior assessment day at Blackfoot High School, I was not able to meet with the English Language Arts department at BHS until yesterday. The nature of the meeting followed very much the same format as the meeting at MVMS yielding the same information. It was during this conversation that the question regarding “Romeo and Juliet” was asked. I responded by saying that piece of literature has been a long-standing pillar of study in high school English classes and that I didn’t believe the concern had surfaced from its use. I was also informed that the dual enrollment English class used two novels, “1984” and “A Brave New World”, that could be perceived as inappropriate. I responded by saying that I personally was aware that those works had been used at BHS for as long as I have been aware, and since this was technically a college course (dual enrollment) I did not feel that had caused the concern. I was again assured by them that to their knowledge no content with inappropriate material had been used in their classes, nor accessed by their students from the supplemental curriculum content.

So, I could go on and on with reassuring our parents regarding the use of inappropriate material in our secondary English Language Arts classroom. That may very well suffice for some, but during my meetings with our staff, I realized I could not do justice to their integrity and character as educators. It was evident, to the point of me being emotional, that these incredible staff members have nothing but the best intentions for our children. An idea came to me during one of those amazing meetings. We need to do more to ease the concern of our parents. I know that as a parent if I was told my children were using pieces of literature that contained pornographic content, I would be the first one in line demanding answers. Therefore, I asked our staff if they would be willing to do an open house to allow our parents to see what material is being used in our classrooms and be reassured by our staff members, not just the wordy superintendent, that nothing but the purest intentions are being made for our children. This open house will take place on April 21, 2021 from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM in the gymnasium at Blackfoot High School. The majority of the teachers will be in attendance, as well as the district administration and the school administration from MVMS and BHS. We will have iPads setup for parents to see what their student has access to in the classroom setting. We know we will never be able to address all the issues, but our desire is to help parents better understand what is taking place in the classroom setting.

I also need to make you aware that the school board will not be taking any action during the April board meeting regarding a curriculum recommendation or selection. I am not sure when that will occur. I suppose it will be at either the May or June school board meeting. Please know the pilot material being used in our classrooms has come from the list of curricula approved by the Idaho State Board of Education and the Idaho State Department of Education. All content related to those pilot programs has been and is available for review by any member of the public at our district office. Our business hours are Monday – Thursday, 7:45 AM – 5:00 PM. I hope the actions we have taken, and those that we will take, will be a benefit to our students, parents, and staff.

Sincerely,

Brian Kress
Superintendent of Schools
Blackfoot School District #55