

Members present

Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

## 1. OPENING OF MEETING

Procedural: A. Call to Order

Meeting called to order at 7:32 pm by Lauren Berman

## B. Announcements

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Greenburgh Town Clerk, Judith Beville notified Valerie about an upcoming Black Lives Matter mural project that will begin in the spring
  - The project is the brainchild of a community member and will involve the surrounding 10 school districts
  - Mural will be located on Manhattan Avenue, off Route 119 under the 287 overpass
  - Valerie and Melissa Szymanski will be working together with the art educators to ensure we have students to participate

## C. Administrative Comments

Melissa Szymanski presented the below report:

Board of Education Administrative Comments  
Melissa Szymanski  
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction  
December 21, 2020

### Theatre

The 6th Grade performance of Oliver Jr. is now streaming. The link can be found on our District website under Announcements. Congratulations to all who were involved in the production.

### ELA Grade 8 Book

Over a decade ago, the Sherman Alexie text, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was brought to our District by the Diversity Committee that existed at that time. This text had been read at the 9th grade level for a number of years and then shifted to the middle school level. In conversations with members of the faculty, it is my understanding that the text was originally selected to create opportunities for students to engage in difficult conversations about racism and to actively denounce it.

Recently, passages of the text were read aloud in 8th Grade English. Despite the intent of selecting this particular text, the impact was that some members of the Farragut Middle School Community felt uncomfortable and marginalized due to disturbing language and content, including use of the n- word being linked to fornication with an animal. It also includes the derogatory use of a term to describe female genitalia, portrayal of Native Americans as drunks and gamblers, and the use of a slur associated with differently-abled children. A decision was made at the District level to no longer read or discuss the content in class.

We will, however, continue to explore if, and where, this text may be used in the future. Unpacking the text at the high school level from a social-political, socio-cultural, and ethnic studies perspective, for example, would serve a different analytic purpose that could be grounded in the current context of our world.

We remain committed to directly engaging students in discussions about race and social justice. We are concurrently committed to ensuring that our curriculum, instruction, assessment practices and learning environments are culturally responsive. This goal is grounded in the principles outlined in the [Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Framework](#).

We are committed to

- affirming cultural identities,
- fostering positive academic outcomes for all learners,
- developing students' abilities to connect across lines of difference,
- elevating historically marginalized voices,
- empowering students as agents of change, and
- contributing to the engagement, learning, growth, and achievement of individual students through the cultivation of critical thinking.

One of the Board agenda items this evening is a proposal that was generated early in December from Dr. Detra Price-Dennis professor at Teachers College, Columbia University and founding Director of #JustLit, around enhancing our equity-based pedagogies. This has been an ongoing commitment of the District. Detra has been working with teachers at Hillside over the past couple of years and has helped to enhance classroom libraries and push our thinking around how to center race in our lesson design in a way that elevates historically marginalized groups. In the short term, we would like Detra to partner with us this year during Chair Council meetings to help us define culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, ensure anti-racist teaching, and curriculum development, explore culturally responsive instructional strategies, redesign lessons, and explore resources to support lesson design. Additional professional learning efforts will

be concurrent, including collaboratively examining our resources and enhancing Teacher Toolkits to support discussions with students about race. I am sharing [a link to an NAACP web page](#) with the Board of Education which outlines how the n- word was laid to rest in 2007.

There has been disagreement from some members of the faculty and some members of the community in how this incident was handled. It is important to note that we are in service to the same goals: ensuring that provocative discussions take place, denouncing racism, taking a stand against the perpetuation of inequity, and ensuring that we are centering the experiences of our learners as we create welcoming and affirming environments.

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Ending the reading of the book was not about censorship but about the psychological harm of a 13 year old African American student, who was horrified by part of the book read in class
- Many classmates had similar reactions
- Allowing the book to be finished by the class, while the distressed student completed an alternate assignment was not an acceptable solution and Valerie did not support doing so
- The book was not censored, and still remains in the English department to determine the books future use
- Unfortunately that the English Department and Department chair people penned letters to the Board of Education without giving Melissa Szymanski a chance to work with them
- Applauds the 13 year old student who chose to be an upstander rather than a bystander when encountering something that is wrong and harmful
- Valerie then addressed the fact that we have established programs to address race such as Courageous Conversations about Race, a Diversity Committee and the creation of a coordinator of Diversity and Inclusion, but it is clear we still have work to do within our district surrounding race
- Hopes that we can move forward and ensure that we always factor in the racial, cultural and ethnic identities of all students and stand united when it comes to never condoning anything that can inflict emotional harm on children in the name of academic freedom

Lauren Berman read the following statement:

Early last spring at one of our Board meetings, in anticipation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in our community, I said that this fall, the District ought to take an "all hands on-deck" approach to the social and emotional well-being of our students, and that their psychological well-being needed to be prioritized even as we aim to provide a rigorous academic program. I urged for this, without argument from others, even before our children were witness to and felt the violence against Black Americans, and the related protests and rallies held nationwide and, in our Village, late spring and summer.

The decision to presently stop reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the 8th grade ELA class is not about banning a book or about censoring materials in our 8th grade curriculum. To me, it is about an 8th grader who had the guts and strength to cry mercy in a classroom, where they are a racial minority, amidst a climate of noted current acute trauma on children related to both the pandemic and racial injustice. I am proud of that 8th grader and I have not stopped thinking about them.

In my 2 ½ years as a member of this Board, we have led our District in support of efforts for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and against racism. That leadership has broadened the role of our Diversity Coordinator, prioritized professional development in this area, expanded the Courageous Conversations curriculum to reach younger learners, and encouraged efforts to recruit a more diverse workforce -- and these efforts have likely had real impact. How can we suspect there is impact? There are three reasons.

1. We know because we have reached a stage where a student could voice a real concern about their discomfort of being a student of color in our District, in real time.
2. We know because when that student spoke up, the District listened.
3. We know because after the District listened, they did something about it.

The book by Sherman Alexie is not banned. It's in our District's library. The copies circulated to the 8th graders weren't confiscated. As a parent of an 8th grader, I know that the students were told they could finish reading it if they were inclined to do so.

Was the decision of how to proceed after the concern of the book came forward smooth? It seems not, and I was not a part of those decisions. But to me, it made sense for the District to stop reading the book in the context of the 8th grade class because Black lives matter at school.

Black lives matter at school. To me, that means the District listens when a Black young person raises their voice of concern about content choices in our classrooms. It means we support the District in their current rollout of the Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Framework. To me, that means our classrooms should include and frame meaningful content that allows children to develop understanding of Black Americans that is not solely in the context of the history of slavery or the Civil Rights era, but reflective of the diverse lives that make up our history, culture, and nation. It means that if the District is making mistakes, and they are not framing difficult conversations or subjects well with children, they should stop. They apologize and reflect.

The decision to stop using the text in the 8th grade ELA class may have been jolting and confusing. But we have been told it was no less jolting and confusing to hear the dehumanizing language about Black people said aloud in a classroom without warning, or, said aloud in a home through the tin of a laptop speaker.

The use of this book, this year, wasn't appropriately prepped for, as maybe it had been in years past. Some very smart and caring community members are framing this situation as "banning a book", and to me, that's not what is happening. It's about making thoughtful choices for books that engage all young people, including Black young people, in their pursuit

of a positive identity. In middle school, personal identity development is central to a student's life. Particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic isolates children and challenges their fortitude, and our current political climate has emboldened people to speak up when made to feel "less-than", providing content that supports all students, including Black students, to view their lives with value, should be the core of classroom discourse.

The administration and faculty need to find a way to move forward together in service of all our students. We should not shy away from challenging young people with important ideas found in diverse books, and I hope through some reflection, and more work together, this moment proves to lead our teachers and administration further in their effort to create a learning community for all.

Board Questions/Comments:

Jeremy Galland:

- Assuming that the parent made contact with Ms. Spirelli and that Ms. Spirelli then reached out to Valerie and Melissa Szymanski to get involved; he posed the question whether or not the teachers had been included in the meetings where the decisions were being made to discontinue the book

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Was involved in one meeting with the Department Chair
- Melissa Szymanski and Jennifer Spirelli can speak to the other meetings they were involved in with the teachers

Melissa Szymanski:

- Clarified that she did not have contact with the parent
- She did have contact with the ELA Department chair and they met prior to the decision to stop the book to process the child's reaction and discuss the text within the context of culturally responsive practices

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Spoke with the Department chair as soon as they were notified by Ms. Spirelli as they were on a meeting together already when they learned of the circumstances
- Ms. Spirelli and the teacher had conversations with the family and Valerie was not involved in those meetings
- Later on the week the parents of the student reached out to Valerie to express their dismay with the continuation of the book and the sense that they had not been heard

Jennifer Spirelli:

- Spoke to the chain of events that occurred from the moment she learned of the incident on Tuesday, December 8th, via email from the parents
- Immediately went to the classroom to observe, the students were not discussing that book at the time
- Contacted the department chair and the teacher involved to discuss the book and events leading up to incident
- Following her meeting with the department chair and teacher she contacted the student's father, it was suggested to remove the book or give an alternative assignment to the student
- Although that was a collaborative decision at the time it was not the best supportive decision for the student, as it made her feel even more marginalized
- Reconvened with department chair and teacher to discuss moving forward and reached out to Melissa Szymanski and Valerie Henning-Piedmonte later that day
- Thursday morning it was decided to stop reading the book in class
- Visited the class to talk to the students and invited them to participate in the principal advisory group to talk about it further

Melissa Szymanski:

- English Department Chair reached out to request a meeting with both her and Valerie, and then reached out again to cancel
- Had a separate discussion with English Department Chair and Lou Adipietro to discuss the text and appropriate placement for the book

Jodie Meyer:

- Expressed her discomfort with the situation and is listening to both sides
- Must address the content, but also consider the process and how things happen so everyone can feel respected and heard
- We have a lot of work to do to make sure students feel comfortable enough to speak up, that families feel valued and that teachers feel valued and get to a place where everyone feels valued and can listen
- Must find a way to have difficult conversations and be able to listen to what everyone is saying so we can find a way to move forward

Alison Andrus:

- Important to have this dialogue and appreciates hearing different opinions
- Book was not banned, students were able to finish the book and it may be used in the future
- Feels it's the process to how do we decide what's the right way forward that led to the division in this situation, how much were teachers included in the decision making on how to move forward
- The school has already decided to work on determining best practices in terms of how often to review the school texts and in which grades they'd be best suited
- We can also look at how to better support our long term substitutes in tackling difficult books

Silvia Robles read the following statement:

Those who know me, know that I am not someone given to speaking frequently or loudly. I am most comfortable listening and observing. Tonight I am compelled to make a comment that represents my perspective on the use of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. This should not be viewed as an opinion shared by the administration or my board

colleagues. I speak up cognizant of the fact that I am the only person of color in our group of 7 and that I have an 8th grader who read the novel.

As in all things, context is important. In the 13 years that I have lived in Hastings, there has been evolving dialogue about race in our schools. Teachers developed a Courageous Conversations curriculum, they formed a Race Matters committee, and the district appointed a Diversity Coordinator. Students dedicated an entire issue of the Buzzer to race and have initiated rallies calling for social justice. Still, at a time of disagreement, we have retreated to divided camps and reduced a complex matter to taking sides. The lack of discourse reflects a belief that we must either choose between teachers or a student and their family. I believe our district can listen to and support both.

Although the administration and teachers have made efforts to incorporate multicultural perspectives into the curriculum, it is important to acknowledge that our district is not very diverse in terms of race or ethnicity. In this fast changing world, it is not sufficient to say that because a text was selected 13 years ago for an older student population, its current use with middle schoolers can never be reassessed. The discussion here is not one of censorship: the book is not banned from our libraries. The issue at hand is whether this was an appropriate use of literature to teach our 8th graders about the complex and diverse world we live in. It shows growth and evolution to say that we can reconsider when and for whom a text is appropriate. We all acknowledge the many ways our teachers earn our respect with their professionalism, dedication, and ability to enrich our children's lives. Respecting teachers, however, does not mean that we should never revisit materials used in a class.

I would also like to address the sentiment that this issue concerns a single complaint and that keeping kids from this text is a misguided effort to insulate children from prejudice in the world. In my estimation, it doesn't matter if it is only one child who spoke up about the use of a slur. There are likely others who felt the same but didn't express it openly. As a Latina, and as a mother of 3 sons in our schools, I can assure members of the community that it is not through works of fiction that children of color are forced to learn about hatred and racial epithets. This can similarly be said about issues related to gender, learning differences, sexual orientation, religious discrimination, etc. It is for this very reason that we must treat such difficult themes with the utmost of care.

When we introduce works that focus on communities that are underrepresented in our town, I think we have a higher responsibility to make sure we are doing it with adequate preparation and communication. As a predominantly white district, we need to proceed with sensitivity before, during, and after racially-charged themes are addressed in school. Importantly, we must provide families with advance notice about materials children will be reading. On Thursday night I heard a panel of recent alums and a current HS senior, all students of color, talking about their experiences in Hastings schools. One telling statement was that conversations about race could only be discussed in the abstract but never in the context of Hastings because it was too uncomfortable for people to look within. Let me be clear. This is not a criticism of our town or the people that live here as this is my home and my family feels very fortunate to be a part of the community. It is simply a statement to acknowledge the unspoken emotions that some people feel.

It is important as adults to affirm that student learning should not be premised on the strength of an individual to overcome his/her discomfort and speak up. We often assume in our town that all people, even middle schoolers, have the confidence to summon up their voices and speak their truth. While this is debatable, I believe that when a student does speak up, we should be willing to listen to, empathize with, and acknowledge where the district can do more to make our learning process better for all.

I don't pretend that any of us find it easy to discuss race but I do know this. The impact of schooling on all children is profound and as a district we are in a unique position to shape the perceptions of students about themselves and others. Does this mean we are going to get every step right along the way or that we will have difficult conversations perfectly? Of course not. No one expects this. It is my belief that in order for our district to move forward together we must stop looking for fault and assume positive intent from one another, even when we disagree. It is for this reason that I support our administration's Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education framework to assess the appropriateness of the texts we use across our schools. Thank you.

Doug Sundheim:

- Expressed that much of the issues surrounding this indecent boils down to respect, the student feeling respected in the class, teachers voices feeling respected and administrators feeling respected
- Feels a sense of low trust amongst administrators and teachers right now and that is a big problem
- The bigger issue is being able to figure out how people with very different points of view can come together and have very difficult conversations in a productive way, so it doesn't turn into community emails or emails to the board
- In reading the email sent to the board - what stood out was how being able to be comfortable with uncomfortable language is a privilege
- Pointed out how deep and insidious systemic and structural racism and privilege is
- Feels all the concerns and issues raised over the last couple of weeks are valid and we need to find a way to bring all those voices into this dialogue

Jeremy Arnon read the following statement:

First, I want to say this should not be an administration versus teachers issue. It's a shame that people immediately go to a mode where you must take a side. We're all rowing the boat in the same direction and the Board is not here to be the referee, we're here to make sure all the oars are rowing together.

In my mind, decisions about this book should have been made over last summer and we should never have wound up in this position in the middle of the school year. We give great autonomy and power, rightly deserved, to our teachers, but this autonomy comes with it a huge responsibility. It seems to me that the decision was made to stick with the status quo.

I was at the student led protest in June in Draper Park and all the school administrators said we need to do better. We need to rethink what we teach, why we teach it, and who makes up the diverse committee that chooses what we teach. So, let's do better.

The argument that the book has been read for 13 years so should still be read moving forward is, frankly, laughable, and flies in the face of everything that has happened this past six months in the world. 13 years ago Barack Obama wasn't even President yet; 13 years ago gay marriage was still a hot button topic in national politics; 13 years ago Harvey Weinstein was raping women and repeatedly getting away with it; and for the past 30 years, people have been asking the Washington Redskins to change their name. And finally, in 2020, they have. Because 2020 marked a change in this country.

A number of people wrote to the board about how Sherman Alexie, the author, came to Hastings to speak and what a great honor that was. I wonder if those people realized that Sherman Alexie had sexual misconduct allegations against him in 2018 which were so serious they led to the Institute of American Indian Arts renaming its Sherman Alexie Scholarship as the MFA Alumni Scholarship and the American Indian Library Association rescinded its 2008 Best Young Adult Book Award from Alexie for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, "to send an unequivocal message that Alexie's actions are unacceptable."

So, are we that tone deaf in Hastings that we have not been watching the Black Lives Matter Movement or the Me Too movement? We talk a good game but when it actually affects us do we not have backbone? In the history of literature, are there no other books that can teach the lesson that was trying to be taught?

Most importantly, and this is what it really comes down to for me, what does it say to students who want to speak up in the future when this is the response from the community?

There's a bigger, symbolic piece to this that was talked about at length in June at two protests in Hastings. Those discussions should have been had during the summer, and I think it's important to make sure these discussions start happening now so we are thinking about why we're choosing the books we're choosing. And maybe there are some things that are symbolic and that's OK, because it's 2020, not 2007.

Jodie Meyer:

- Wanted to go on record to state that on the part of the teachers it was not their intent that students could feel uncomfortable or perhaps unsafe, not to say it hasn't happened, but that it was not the intent

Jeremy Galland:

- Posed questions regarding how many years the book has been used in the 8th grade, whose decision it was to stop reading and to what extent the English Department Chair was involved in making the decision to stop reading the book and did he agree with the decision

Jennifer Spirelli:

- The book has been read for several years on and off in the middle school, exact number not known
- English Department Chair was involved in many of the discussions and would have to ask him if he agreed
- Shared that it was a collaborative decision that was made

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Shared that her and Melissa Szymanski also consulted with Dr. Detra Price-Dennis, who has done racial literacy work with the district and who did not endorse a book that was harmful to children and was concerned about the tone against females

Alison Andrus:

- Suggested that a discussion closing out the book with the students would help them understand what happened, as students seem confused

Jeremy Galland:

- Asked if there was a way the book can be discussed this school year with the 8th graders who are reading on their own

Melissa Szymanski:

- People need to understand why decisions are made, they may not necessarily agree with why decisions are made, but that's definitely an important part of process so that there's there's a shared understanding

Jennifer Spirelli:

- Shared what the next steps would be and how they plan to move forward to handle these situations
- Partnering with Jenice Toledo, Inclusion Coordinator, to support planning conversations and how to approach conversations in the classroom
- Sharing the books and/or texts that will be read and discussing potentially sensitive topics beforehand with parents

Jeremy Galland:

- Teachers very vocal in their disappointment to stopping the book
- Asked if administrators had read book before the incident and stated that the teachers having read the text would be the ones to advise the parents on what finishing the book might have involved

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- English Department Chair has not endorsed the book as something that we should continue
- We either value the concerns of the student or we don't, we can't have it both ways
- Other students had concerns as well, we are not a community that tolerates even one of our community members feeling marginalized

Jeremy Galland:

- Pointed out that the book had one offensive line and nothing more referencing black americans
- Disagrees with the decision to stop the book and thinks it should be continued
- Questioned Valerie regarding her comments in an Enterprise story where she commented that she learned that community members left Hastings due to racism

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Explained that these comments were made to her by community members and she was just expressing what was told to her

Jeremy Galland:

- Disagrees with stopping the book, but is very supportive of never reading another book from this author who was proven to be abusive to women
- Wanted the teachers to be more involved in the decision, feels its somewhat censorship although the book was not banned

Doug Sundheim:

- This is a crisis because it cuts to the heart of how we're educating our children right now
- The world is rapidly changing and we all have to look at how we are contributing to the challenges we are facing
- Struggling to connect with each other and have trust

Lauren Berman:

- Agrees with Doug that this is a crisis, but also a breakthrough in terms of students and families of color feeling safe to speak in our community and that community members feel comfortable to share their experiences with Valerie

D. Student Report:

Sophia Maniero:

- When the book was pulled, high school students were confused and thought it was banned
- Listening tonight, there are valid reasons for the book to be stopped
- High school students would be open to hearing the reasons why

Sabine Hinkaty:

- Very eye-opening as a high school student to listen to this discussion

## 2. PUBLIC COMMENT

### A. Public Comment

Gregory Smith - Social Studies Department Chair:

- Has been teaching social studies at Hastings High school since 1999, this is the first time he's addressed the board directly, feels that speaks volumes to the marginalization and the issues of trust and respect that the teachers are facing at this time
- Pointed out that for teachers it is about content and process
- Read the following letter that was written to the BOE regarding the decision to stop reading book:  
This year, the district has asked teachers to work toward broadening the range of culturally responsive materials and experiences they offer their students. The decision to cancel the 8th grade's study of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a novel that was introduced to the school 12 years ago by the district's diversity committee for precisely this purpose, sends the message that our efforts at selecting materials, planning units and lessons, and providing meaningful opportunities to consider timely cultural issues can be cancelled without discussion or notice.

As disturbed as we are by the decision to censor this particular text, we are far more troubled by the fact that any book can be cancelled by parties who have not read it, have limited knowledge of its content and its place in the class, and have not conferred with the teacher, the department chair, or other appropriate professionals within the district to discuss the role the book plays in the course and our curriculum as a whole. Such a decision is entirely unprecedented in our schools. It is beyond demoralizing; it is insulting and the precedent it establishes is dangerous.

Our district purports to promote inclusive curricula and practices, to bristle at censorship, and to prize difficult conversations about compelling social issues. Our district claims to value and respect our teachers. As educators, we wonder how this decision can be seen as anything but antithetical to these values.

Signed All the department chairpersons (English, Fine Arts, Physical Education & Health, Special Education, World Languages, HASP, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics and Music)

Maria Rudolph - High School English Teacher:

- Stressed that as English teachers they teach empathy through the stories shared with students
- Pulling this material from the teacher is antithetical to the nature of our pedagogical practices, because students haven't been guided and have been left on their own.
- Read the following letter from 10 members of the High School and Middle School English Department:  
We are deeply concerned about the decision to censor the 8th grade's reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, a book we have taught in Hastings for over a dozen years.

We began teaching it on the recommendation of the school's Diversity Committee, who saw it as an excellent example of a work that "talked about race and gender" featuring "voices students didn't normally hear." The book's frank presentation of bigotry, discrimination, substance abuse, and other "adult issues" can make teaching it challenging, but we've continued

to teach the novel precisely because of such challenges. The book facilitates meaningful conversations about significant social issues, and over the years students of all backgrounds and ability levels have felt respected and empowered by the opportunity to discuss a text that feels so authentic and important.

The moment in the novel that led to its cancellation involves a racist joke that is upsetting for the book's hero and for its audience. When the joke is made, it provides students a chance to share their outrage with their peers and their teacher, and to review strategies for confronting those who enact and tolerate such behaviors. Most importantly, it allows us to reaffirm our commitment as a community to respond appropriately and forcefully when such jokes are made.

Though the scene presents the sort of teachable moment that makes the book so valuable, we recognize that it can be uncomfortable for students, and for students of color in particular. While we believe that part of our job as teachers is to help students develop the skills to work through such discomfort, we understand that there are times when this is not the best option. In such moments, students may be excused from reading a particular text and offered alternative assignments. We know that in this instance the parties involved were offered this option, and we understand that they would have been satisfied with such a solution.

We deeply regret that this was not the direction the district decided to take.

Our district takes great pride in promoting inclusive curricula, free speech, and difficult conversations about important social issues. We cannot reconcile the decision to censor this novel with these values, or with the trust and respect the district claims to feel for its teachers.

Debbie Quinn - Director of the Hastings Library:

- Read the following memo that she wrote which was endorsed by the Board Members of the library:  
It has come to our attention that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie has been removed from the 8th grade curriculum without discussion, consultation or input from teachers, parents or the community at large. Such action is censorship and is not only dangerous but totally unacceptable in this community and in a school district that espouses "Courageous Conversations," supports a Diversity/Social Emotional Learning Committee, and that lays claim to the principles in the "Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Framework" referenced in Melissa Szymanski and Jennifer Spirelli's December 16th letter to 8th Grade Families.

In 2007, high school English teacher Ross Abrams, and Sonja Cherry-Paul, then teaching fifth-grade at Farragut Middle School, received a significant Hastings Education Foundation grant "to present a series of speakers from groups traditionally marginalized and underrepresented in American culture and educational curricula." (The Rivertowns Enterprise, November 7, 2007, p. 3.) Mr. Alexie met separately with high school and middle school students, and they were able to ask him difficult questions and receive honest answers.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* presents a perfect platform for our students to engage in frank, meaningful discussions led by the talented professionals in this district's excellent English Departments. For 13 years, this book has introduced insights and provoked thought in our classrooms and now, as this nation grapples with the deep-rooted problems of systemic racism, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been removed from the curriculum—a measure profoundly wrong and setting a frightening precedent for the future.

As advocates of the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, we ask the Board of Education to join us in defending the third amendment of this Bill which certainly applies to schools as well: "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment."

We hope the Board of Education will uphold and support the mission of the Hastings school district to provide open and meaningful dialogue about diverse cultures.

Dr. Lang:

- Asked whether or not students of color in the high school were consulted in any of this
- Held a forum and invited high school students where they expressed their concerns when the intent of instruction produces the wrong impact
- Has been in higher education for 20 years, under no circumstance should an administrator ban a book that she uses in her class
- Expressed to instructors and chairs that she would have signed the document because academic freedom is important to protect, but is concerned about the validity of the concerns raised
- Raised the question to Sophia and Sabine, if they had spoken to the Affinity Group
- Are we looking at both side of the coin to fully integrate and not to just take the route of dominance or compromise

Sophia Maniero:

- Stated that she is personally interested in hearing from the side of those who felt uncomfortable with the text as that is not something she has experienced as a white person
- Hopes this dialogue is also included in the high school

Josh Blum - English Department Chair:

- Has been teaching in the district since 1990
- Has no particular allegiance to this book
- Has only heard positive things about it up until this point
- When he spoke with Melissa Szymanski she raised the prospect of finding better books to do the job that this book did and he was amenable to that
- Wanted to express on behalf of himself and his colleagues - this is not about the text, this is about the response to the text
- Teachers are encouraged to engage in difficult conversations and texts they include often deal with uncomfortable issues
- Decision was made without much input from teachers and he was not on board with this decision

- Moving forward they want to be part of the process and were disappointed with how things were handled

### 3. BUSINESS

#### Action: A. Business Items

RESOLVED, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education approve the business items.

Motion by Jodie Meyer, second by Silvia Robles.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

#### Action: B. Placement and/or Services for CSE and CPSE

RESOLVED, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Committee on Special Education and the Committee on Preschool Special Education, the Board of Education accepts the classifications and arrangements for the placement and/or services for the 2020-2021 school year.

Motion by Jodie Meyer, second by Alison Andrus.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

### 4. PERSONNEL

#### Action: A. Appointments

RESOLVED, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education approve the appointments.

Motion by Jeremy Galland, second by Doug Sundheim.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

#### Action: B. Resignations

RESOLVED, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education accept the resignation.

Motion by Silvia Robles, second by Jeremy Galland.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

#### Action: C. Leaves of Absence

RESOLVED, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education approve the following leaves of absence.

Motion by Jodie Meyer, second by Doug Sundheim.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

### 5. MINUTES

#### Action, Minutes: A. Approval of Minutes

RESOLVED that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education accepts the Minutes of the Regular Board Meeting of

Motion by Doug Sundheim, second by Jeremy Galland.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

### 6. OLD BUSINESS

#### Presentation: A. Construction Project Update

Maureen Caraballo:

- The construction project taking place at Hillside has gone out to bid and has already received tremendous interest from contractors
- Project will be divided among five contractors per NY state law
- Initially planned to open bids on January 5, 2021 but they have now extended this by a week due to the holidays to ensure accurate pricing and proper bid submission numbers

#### Action, Discussion, Information: B. Second Read of Policies

RESOLVED, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education approves the policies.

Motion by Doug Sundheim, second by Jeremy Arnon.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus

### 7. NEW BUSINESS

#### Discussion: A. Religious Holiday Discussion

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte:

- Met with bargaining units today to discuss the 2021/2022 school calendar
- Discussed additional holidays that are under consideration to be added to the 2021/2022 school calendar:
  - Juneteenth - June 20, 2022
  - Chinese New Year - February 1, 2022



- o Holi (Hindu Holiday) - March 18, 2022
- o Eid al-Fitr - (Muslim Holiday) - May 3, 2022
- o Eid al Adha - (Muslim Holiday) - July 10, 2022
- o Discussed potentially having a 1/2 day the day before Thanksgiving

Jodie Meyer:

- Raised the question if we should continue to have Columbus Day as a holiday

Silvia Robles:

- Suggested Diwali (Hindu Holiday) - November 4, 2021

#### 8. SECOND PUBLIC COMMENT

Information: A. Second Public Comment

Ann Melvin - Hastings Resident:

- 8th grade book being pulled had to do with a child and not a book
- Concerned and upset to see the community focus on the book and not on the child

Timothy Baer:

- Pointed out that it appears that the thought process for stopping the book was not just based on the usage of the N word but based on Valerie and Melissa's conversations with Dr. Detra Price-Dennis, around the author's treatment of women
- Feels that information would have been valuable to communicate to teachers in the decision making process
- Stated that in his years on the board and 15 years of connection with the district he has never seen this level of tension, asks the Board to work directly with Valerie Henning-Piedmonte and Melissa Szymanski to bring people together and repair trust

#### 9. BOARD OF EDUCATION COMMENTS

#### 10. ADJOURNMENT

Action: A. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn the meeting.

Motion by Alison Andrus, second by Silvia Robles.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Yes: Jodie Meyer, Doug Sundheim, Jeremy Galland, Jeremy Arnon, Lauren Berman, Silvia Robles, Alison Andrus