

First Meeting- December 1, 2022

Second Meeting- January 5, 2023

Committee members:

Matteo Anello- Community Member

John Fitzpatrick- Middle School Principal

Carrie Gordon- Reading Teacher

Michael Lauria- Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Staff Development and HR

Sharyn Mudd- Middle School Librarian

Carolyn Schopp- Community Member

Summary of the Complaint:

A community member and parent submitted a book challenge to The Grand Island Central School District. The District form, *Request for Re-Evaluation of Instructional Materials*, was submitted by the complainant on September 27, 2022. This form is submitted to the School District by any party who wishes to express concerns with the content within instructional materials. The text in question is a graphic novel, entitled *Flamer*, written by author Mike Curato. *Flamer* is currently a library book in the catalog of Veronica E. Connor Middle School. It is not a required text for students in the school, but a material that students have the option to check-out from the school library.

The book *Flamer* was acquired by the Veronica E. Connor Middle School library on September 27, 2021. There is currently one hardcover copy in the district, located in the middle school library. Since that time, it has been checked out a total of four times, including the most recent during September 2022, that initiated this complaint. According to the parent, the text was checked out by a Middle School student who intended to read the book and use it for a book project for a class report. When the parent reviewed the text, the complainant found it to be offensive and reported it to the Middle School Principal and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. The child decided to take out a different text, considered to be more appropriate by the parent, and used the new selection for the class project.

On the *Grand Island School District Request for Re-Evaluation of Instructional Materials* challenge form submitted, the complainant did photocopy examples of select pages from the book that were considered inappropriate or offensive. These pages were not listed on the form, but determined by the committee and are referenced in the chart below. When asked to include details about specific concerns, the parent provided limited explanation as to why each page was offensive. The parent admittedly did not read the book cover to cover, but acknowledged flipping through the pages. Obscene sexual pictures, vulgar language, and explicit pictures of self-harm were referenced as the materials the parent objected to. When the parent was asked to comment on any reviews of the book, that section of the form was crossed out and the parent stated, "I was surprised that the library chose this text." The parent's recommendation is to immediately remove the book from the District. On the form, it asks for the parent to describe what place the book has in the library system, or if there is an alternate suggestion for material

that can provide information to students on the subject. The parent responded, “None, this book has zero purpose in schools.”

Library materials are selected to support or enhance the school curriculum and also meet the needs and interests of students. Library materials are often available for student independent reading. It was important for the committee to follow the full process for the text *Flamer*, because the parent indicated that the student intended to use it for a class project. Therefore, the district decided it was important to review the textbook and follow the re-evaluation process.

Review of the Contested Content

All members of the committee have read the entire graphic novel *Flamer*. All pages that the parent objected to were reviewed by the committee. The committee’s concerns were discussed, as well as the overall value that each scene (or page) offers the reader. Since the complainant did not elaborate on any specific concerns from the submitted examples, the committee surmised the projected concerns listed. A summary of the committee’s review of the contested material is included in the chart below:

Page(s)	Description of Content
Page 74	<p>Aiden is getting ready to go into the shower with other boys and thinks, “What if someone thinks my penis is small? I mean, it’s not microscopic but there’s the age-old shrinkage dilemma.”</p> <p>Possible Concern: Can students be mature enough for this content at the middle school level?</p> <p>Potential Value: These are his own thoughts and feelings. It is common for a middle school child to think this way.</p> <p>The character is reflecting on his own thoughts and not being chastised for it.</p> <p>It is common for students Aiden’s age in middle school to feel that they are never good enough and feel difficulty in finding their own way.</p>
Page 76-77	<p>These pages are a continuation of the shower scene above and Aiden’s thought process. Aiden thinks, “Don’t look down. Don’t look down. Look up.” Another camper in the shower says, “What, are you trying to get Jones pregnant?” Another says, “I don’t want you homos looking at my ass.”</p> <p>Possible Concerns: Language refers to sexual content that may be inappropriate for some middle school aged students.</p>

	<p>References are made referring to potential sexual acts.</p> <p>Potential Value: Creates empathy for students who face this type of bullying.</p> <p>Character is showing authentic thoughts and concerns for not feeling “Good enough.”</p> <p>Students often face similar awkward uncomfortable moments.</p> <p>References real adolescent struggles with being self-conscious, body image, masculinity, and fitting in.</p>
Page 81	<p>This is a continuation of the shower scene in which Aiden is thinking, “Oh no!! I’m getting a boner.”</p> <p>Possible Concerns: Reference to nudity and a hormonal sexual response.</p> <p>Some students may not have the maturity level to handle this and some others may not.</p> <p>Potential Value: The focus is on the awkwardness for Aiden, not on the image of any body parts.</p> <p>This references the embarrassment students feel when going through puberty and having new feelings.</p>
Page 208-209	<p>In this scene Aiden knocks Mark’s tooth out. Mark gets angry and yells, “I am going to FUCK YOU, U..uh...” while he grabs Aiden’s shirt.</p> <p>Possible Concerns: Resorting to violence to solve disputes/ problems.</p> <p>Mark’s threat, the language used, and how it might be interpreted.</p> <p>Potential Value: This shows Aiden reaching his breaking point as he is getting picked on. Relates to bullies at school being allowed to continue harassing others until a student reaches his or her threshold.</p> <p>This is realistic fiction for a child who no one will stand up for, and what can happen. These are common situations that impact our students.</p>
Page 305-	<p>This scene focuses on a pocket knife being opened and Aiden holds it</p>

306	<p>up to his wrist. He is thinking about cutting it with the knife, but never follows through.</p> <p>Possible Concern: Shows self-harm as a potential option.</p> <p>Potential Value: Some adolescents struggle with self-harm and this is a real decision students might consider.</p> <p>In the text this is the point where he stops, and the idea of harming himself shifts to the idea of healing himself.</p> <p>In context of the novel's ending, this is the turning point. From this point on the book references hope, healing, friendship, and support.</p>
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Committee Recommendations and Explanation

The committee has been asked to respond to each of the following overarching questions.

“Does the benefit of the book being considered as a whole outweigh the parts that are related to the complaint?”

“Is the text appropriate for the middle school grade level?”

In reviewing the text, the committee believes that the overall theme of the book is designed to address common struggles faced by adolescents in the pre-teen or teen years. Students often struggle with the idea of being accepted by their peers, and navigating through puberty, societal changes, parent conflict, and new relationships. They struggle balancing new experiences with pre-existing values. Many students have an existing foundation from family traditions, faith, culture, education, and strong expectations for the future. As students grow, mature, and develop sexually, many of these foundational beliefs are challenged by their peers, and often themselves. Author Mike Curato addresses common issues such as bullying, self-esteem, peer pressure, questioning religion, sexuality, and fitting in.

Throughout the novel, the main character, Aiden, discovers his self-identity and eventually finds the acceptance he is desperately seeking. Though the novel is set in the mid 90's, many of these challenges still face middle and high school students in our contemporary world. The committee does believe that the text has literary merit and can be a benefit for students. The potential benefit can strongly outweigh the concerning areas of content referenced by the parent challenge. It is true that there are some graphic references to violence, sexuality, and self-harm, but these same issues are often the root of many struggles faced by our own students. They are presented in an authentic manner, true to the nature of how they are manifested in our schools. These matters are commonly tackled in the social emotional support programs provided in the

public school system. The committee did not consider the referenced scenes to be “pornographic”. The images were not presented to create sexual excitement, but instead to portray the author's own struggles. The committee believes maintaining this book in our library collection could minimally serve to help one or more struggling or at-risk students in the future.

The graphic novel, *Flamer*, was represented on the 2020 list of *Best Graphic Novels*, which was released by the *School Library Journal*. *Kirkis* reviewed it as, “One of the best young adult books of 2020”. *The School Library Journal* suggests the content is appropriate for grade eight (8) and up. *Booklist* suggests grade nine (9) and up, and *Teaching Book* suggests grades seven to twelve (7-12). The committee recognizes that the maturity level of each student is a truer indication of whether he or she could benefit from this text. Mike Curato, the author himself, suggests an age of fourteen (14) or older, consistent with the typical age of a student in grade eight (8) or nine (9).

For this reason, we would like to suggest that students of middle school age in grade eight (8) or older be able to access the text, and younger students in grades six and seven have an opportunity to read this text at the discretion of a parent or guardian. One suggestion is to follow a common current practice in which a “teen sticker” be placed on the book to identify the text as appropriate for “young adults,” and a consent form be completed by a parent or guardian for students in grades six or seven to check it out.

Summary of recommendations:

- Continue to allow the novel *Flamer* to be accessible to all students in eighth grade at Veronica E Connor Middle School. The committee believes it is also appropriate to allow students in grade six or seven access to the book with the consent of a parent or guardian.