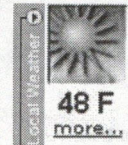


Anaya, Rudolfo - "Bless Me, Ultima" - Censorship - Banned Books



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Updated Friday, February 4, 2005 5:48 PM MST

**Norwood superintendent defends decision to ban book**

Katharhynn Heidelberg

NORWOOD - "The Catcher in the Rye."

"Of Mice and Men."

"Lord of the Flies."

A chorus of student voices rang out Friday at Norwood High School, to apprise R2 School District Superintendent Bob Condor of books deemed "objectionable" that were nonetheless required reading.

And now, it's "Bless Me, Ultima," the book Condor pulled from curriculum after one parent objected to its content.

Condor also reportedly turned all copies of the book over to the complaining parent, who is alleged to have destroyed them. The Daily Press was unable to reach that individual Friday, or to confirm reports the books were burned.

Last month, Norwood High teacher Lisa Doyle assigned Rudolfo Anaya's award-winning novel about a Mexican boy's spiritual journey and encounter with a healer, Ultima.

In a letter to parents, Doyle summarized the book and advised them it "deals with some intense spiritual questions and also contains some adult language." She offered parents the opportunity to preview the book, which she said Condor had approved.

But by Jan. 12, she'd issued a retraction to the latter statement and a debate began. Was it censorship, or the enforcement of state and school obscenity policies?

Condor said at a Friday morning assembly that he wasn't trying to censor anyone's reading material, but to protect them from being forcibly subjected to profanity by a "mandatory assignment."

"I have not read the book," he said. "I've been told it is a wonderful book. It may be, but that is not the point. The point is, it contains language that everything else we do says is inappropriate and it is a mandatory assignment. That is the reason I pulled the book."

The book, challenged in several schools in the 1990s, is now on Laura Bush's recommended reading list.

Condor explained that school policies prohibit obscene language and clothing and mandate the filtering of Internet sites to protect students. He also said his actions had the support of the state board of education,

**PulsePoll**

Should the Norwood school superintendent have banned 'Bless me, Ultima'?

- Yes
- No
- Don't care



which delegates authority over curricula to school administration.

"It isn't a matter of censorship, it's a matter of curricula," he said. "It is a double standard for us to tell you that you cannot wear a T-shirt that has profanity on it and then say it is all right for us to make that a mandatory assignment for you."

Applause thundered out after one female student said those who could not handle profanity were probably unprepared for high school.

Condor flatly denied previous reports that the book's "pagan" elements had factored in to his decision, though more than one person present at the assembly said they felt otherwise.

However he said he regretted turning over the copies of "Bless Me, Ultima" to the complaining parent when a student asked why the books couldn't have been donated to the library.

"If I had it all to do over again, I would probably make a different decision," Condor said, adding that books, like computers, could become "obsolete or worthless." He said books no longer in use at the school were routinely destroyed.

"I wasn't concerned about whether it was in the library or not in the library," he said. "I was simply concerned that it was a mandatory assignment.

"It's not my point to take away your freedom of choice to read a book. It was my point to take away a mandatory assignment on a book that had inappropriate material. I think the author ought to send me a letter of thanks for boosting his sales."

Why, students asked, had he approved a book he had not read?

Condor said he hadn't. "(That's) quite frankly not true." Condor said he'd approved the purchase of the book, just like "hundreds" of other books used, as a matter of routine business.

He did admit that Doyle had been "required" to write the letter, but said it was because "she told a lie" - a remark that angered several, as Doyle was not present to defend herself.

Additionally, he contended that parents were not given a chance to "opt" their child out of the assignment, prompting some to ask when assignments had ever been "optional."

Student Sarah Setzer, who helped organized a student sit-in Friday, told the Daily Press that Doyle "made it very clear" to the class that an alternate book was available.

"She repeated it several times and she repeated it several times to him (Condor)," Setzer said.

Setzer did believe that Condor had only approved a requisition to purchase the book.

"But I do believe that before he goes and censors and bans a book from a classroom that he should at least read over a one-paragraph summary of it. Apparently none of the books at school are 'approved,' so, are they all going to be destroyed?"

Condor also said the resale value for "Bless Me, Ultima" was poor, later telling the Daily Press that offers from private individuals to pay \$1,000 apiece for the books were "insincere" because they came after initial media reports.

Condor assured students that in the future there would be a committee, made up of students, teachers and parents, to institute guidelines for required reading.

Other attendees wanted to know if profanity would be the only reason a

book would be called into question and whose standards would come into play.

"The standard is going to be somewhere between Mickey Mouse and pornography," Condor said. "We at least need to make some standards."

He abruptly ended the assembly on grounds that the questions were becoming repetitive and because he'd agreed to institute a committee to address concerns.

"This isn't about the First Amendment," Condor said. "Use your heads. Nobody is stopping you from reading the book; we're stopping you from having it forced on you."

Teacher Jessica Flammang disagreed.

"This is a gross infringement on our civil liberties," she said. "I think it was a vast oversight on his part to approve the purchase of the book without reading the book."

Norwood is located in San Miguel County approximately 67 miles from Montrose. The high school has approximately 100 students.

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