

Durant teacher fears book controversy

By Zachary Pearlman

In his former position as middle school teacher at Ottumwa, Durant English teacher Mr. Michael Cronk has seen the effects of a book removal—and wants no part of it again. The book in question was *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie.

Mr. Cronk believed the book would be relatable to the students he was teaching at the time.

He met with another teacher and decided to replace the current novel with Alexie's story of a Native American teenager growing up on a reservation in Washington state.

"These kids [in Ottumwa] might have the same issues as the main character here," he said. "We are touching on minority groups and issues these families might face."

He said a parent of a child who was not in either of the classes teaching the book got hold of it, went to a specific page, and took a picture of it.

The page was referring to mas-

turbation. However, with all books taught in school, teachers have the option to skip parts, including Mr. Cronk.

"I chose to not read that part, but this person posted the excerpt from the book on Facebook, and it went viral," he said.

"Hundreds, thousands of people liked it, shared it, and the principal shut the book down."

He said the other middle school teacher covering the book in the unit came under fire because Mr. Cronk was relatively unknown in the district.

The book was shut down until it went to a school board meeting where it was decided teachers could bring it back to the curriculum.

"They ended up giving that teacher the Teacher of the Year Award because she was that good," he said.

On top of that, he said his students loved the book.

"They were all about it; they thought it was hilarious," he said.

"They were getting a ton of infor-

mation out of it. And like I said, it was really relatable."

After this interaction, Mr. Cronk is scared to teach any book that is too edgy.

"I do not want that to ever happen again," he said. "I would rather stay under the radar. I am not going to push the envelope again to put it that way...It completely took away the freedom of the class."

Mr. Cronk's experience shows the dangers of a state removal list being proposed by the Iowa Senate.

The bill would establish a list of books that have been removed from school districts across the state of Iowa for obscene or sexually explicit material.

For any book on that list, districts would be required to get parental consent to teach or distribute the book.

If these conditions are not met by a district, it would get a warning. If it happened again, staff members and the superintendent could be subject to a disciplinary hearing if the law was knowingly violated.

Mr. Cronk, along with many other

teachers across the state of Iowa, may opt to completely avoid any novel with even the potential to be on the removal list.

While this bill is designed to help the educational system and provide parents a way into the classroom, teachers will self-censor their curriculum to avoid any controversy, which will ultimately affect a student's education.

Our teachers are meant to teach our kids, which in and of itself, is no easy feat.

My mom, another English teacher at Durant, stays up throughout the night helping students and grading their work. On top of that, she is always looking for new ways to help her students learn in and outside of the classroom.

Revoking teachers' freedom to build a class curriculum in fear of it being restricted or taken the wrong way will remove the enjoyment of these classes for their students.

Our teachers already go above and beyond to help their students. Why make their jobs harder?

Legislation From page 1

schools and districts have in place to prevent students from accessing sexually explicit content and pornography on school-issued devices to be honored for books in the public schools."

Ms. Turner also says that since school libraries were unable to provide a list of books containing sexually explicit content, Moms for Liberty took it into their own hands in order to let parents know what their kids are exposed to.

Ms. Turner said school districts have not been transparent with their curriculum, and it first became an issue during COVID-19 when "parents were able to see first-hand what their kids were learning and not learning in the online-hybrid format during COVID, and many were shocked."

Ms. Turner said she felt that teachers were pushing a particular political perspective in the classroom.

"Schools were not allowing parents in the building, and schools started elevating feelings and prioritizing ideologies over academics. When parents started realizing the materials being used in language arts and on the shelves in school libraries, parents lost a lot of trust with the schools," she said.

Ms. Turner feels the teachers in her day would never teach some of this content, and that these were not the same schools she was educated in.

"We never knew the political affiliation of our teachers, nor would our teachers ever make us feel ostracized about polarizing topics in the media," she said.

Like Mr. Burnett, the school librarian at Durant, Mrs. Katy Dohrmann, also opposes the state removal list.

"My opinion is that I am opposed to that because I think the control should be held at the school district level," she said.

"I don't think one parent or one group of people or one community should have the decision that that book is wrong for every community or every student in the state of Iowa."

She added, "If a parent in our community wants to challenge a book, they have that choice to do so."

The *Chronicles* did not receive responses to questions sent to Gov. Reynolds and to Iowa Sen. Kerry Gruenhagen of Walcott.

Survey From page 1

She even believes that it might've changed since the survey was last taken.

One section covers adult-to-student relationships at the middle and high schools.

Exactly three-fourths of Durant's students 7-12 believe that adults working at school treat students with respect, and 84

percent of students reported their teachers care about them.

Almost 90 percent of students reported that they are able to see an adult at school if they have a problem.

In one question, 52 percent of students agree that they or other students treat one another with respect.

Junior Michael Ostofi believes that Durant students do respect one another.

"I'd say I witnessed a lot of respect from my class because in my opinion we're older and know what to do when told and know how to follow instructions when given, and I'd say the junior class does it best, as well as some students from the lower classes, mainly sophomores with select freshman," said Ostofi.

An overwhelming majority of 94 percent of students stated that they are able to turn to their friends if they need help with their homework, and 92 percent said they

have trusted friends that they can turn to if they have other problems.

Another survey section covers boundaries and expectations set by the students' parents, the adults working at the middle and high schools, and the students themselves.

One question in that category asked if students felt safe at school, and most, 78 percent, answered yes.

For the 22 percent that answered no, senior Caleb Clark believes that the school has precautions if something were to happen.

"I feel that many people could not feel safe at school, but me personally, I feel like school is a safe place, and other people should feel the same," said Clark.

"I definitely think that this year, which is my last year, they've really cracked down on a lot of safety precautions, I guess, like backpacks and stuff, like a lot of teach-

ers yelling at you to put them in your locker," he continues.

According to two other survey questions, only 15 percent of students say there are not clear rules about what students can and can't do at school. However, 34 percent of students believe that Durant's principal and teachers don't enforce rules consistently.

Durant High School Principal Joel Diederichs said he leaves teachers in charge of their own classrooms with a basic set of handbook rules, but they can add possible variations in the rules.

"I let the teachers set their guidelines of what they want in that aspect," he said. "I don't have every teacher teach exactly the same. There's different styles because we all learn differently too."

As for enforcing discipline, he believes he treats each case individually almost like a judge.

"If a student comes in, we look at all the different facts to it, all the situations of it, and we make a decision," said Mr. Diederichs.

"Unfortunately not everybody knows everything that we can do for safety and for confidentiality for students."

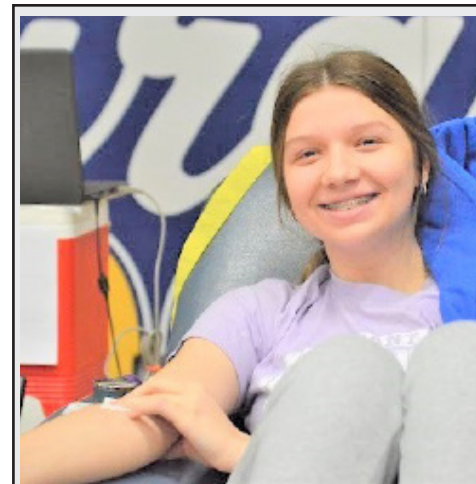


Photo by Mackenzie Oberlander
Junior Olivia Alpen donates blood February 21 at a blood drive sponsored by the Durant student council.



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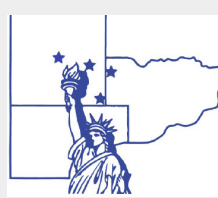
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Sophomore Wyatt Richards is a two-year theater member. He was cast as a gloomy Russian waiter named Boris Stroganoff in the recent play *Million Dollar Meatballs*. Richards says, "I participate in play because I want to show my acting capabilities and one day be a big actor."



Richards



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