

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

MEMORANDUM #201 (2004-2005)

February 7, 2005

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: ARAB WORLD STUDIES NOTEBOOK

RECOMMENDATION:

It is the Administration's recommendation that the School Board disallow the Arab World Studies Notebook (AWSN) for use in Anchorage School District classrooms. It is further recommended that Dr. Enid Hunter, Executive Director of Curriculum and Instructional Support, and Steve Ex, Social Studies Coordinator, convene an ad hoc high school social studies curriculum committee to identify supplementary materials and community speakers for ASD's high school Middle East elective course. Their recommendations are to be presented for Board approval no later than January 1, 2006.

PERTINENT FACTS:

In fall of 2003, representatives from UAA, the Alaska Humanities Forum, Anchorage School District and other community groups organized a Middle East workshop for teachers to be held in conjunction with the November 2003 national conference of the Middle East Scholars Association (MESA). MESA consistently supports public school efforts wherever their annual conference is held.

Audrey Shabbas, editor of the Arab World Studies Notebook (AWSN), offered a Middle East art workshop to Alaskans as part this course. Copies of AWSN were available at a reduced price to educators. Prior to the MESA conference, local educators and other individuals had seen excerpts of AWSN that disturbed them. As a result, a petition came to Superintendent Carol Comeau to keep AWSN out of the District (Attachment A). The Superintendent tasked a committee, under the auspices of the Social Studies department to review AWSN (Attachment B). She also wrote a letter indicating that AWSN was not to be used in ASD classes until and unless it was reviewed and approved by this ad hoc committee (Attachment C). That letter was distributed to all ASD educators purchasing the notebook. Voting by the 13-member committee resulted in a close vote opposing the use of AWSN in ASD classrooms.

Steve Ex, Social Studies Coordinator, shared with the Superintendent the points made from many perspectives on these materials and on related issues. After review, the Superintendent recommended her letter to ASD teachers regarding AWSN would remain in effect until the decision-making processes outlined below were completed.

- The Controversial Issues Review Committee (CIRC) would review the AWSN and make a recommendation to the Superintendent regarding the use of AWSN in ASD for the high school Middle East elective course, and allow for recorded public testimony representing all perspectives of this controversy.
- An ad hoc high school social studies curriculum committee would convene to identify and seek Board approval for appropriate materials and community speakers for ASD's high school Middle East elective course.

The CIRC met twice to discuss this piece of material. At an initial meeting Steve Ex presented a brief history of the events (outlined above). Since the AWSN was neither adopted ASD curriculum, nor approved supplemental material, the petition that was submitted to Superintendent Comeau was used as the official complaint. Written statements representing both viewpoints that came from the Ad Hoc review committee were provided for the CIRC.

After careful review and thoughtful discussion, the committee voted to approve the motion to disallow the AWSN to be used in Anchorage School District classrooms.

Highlights of the discussion that influenced the decision:

The editor does not edit the articles included in the notebook. They are added “as is” to the notebook as they are periodically received.

Based on the constantly changing nature of the AWSN, checking these articles for accuracy, “quality control” if you will, would become a significant responsibility for ASD staff in charge of housing the notebook, such as the site librarian,

A substantial amount of historical, political and content area information in the notebook was determined to be historically inaccurate. This caused committee members to question which of the remaining articles of this nature might be inaccurate. Many of the articles lacked footnoted references.

The notebook contains lesson plans. It was wondered how staff, particularly those who are new and/or inexperienced, or who did not have Middle Eastern scholarly expertise, could determine what was factual and what was not.

Many of the articles on art, music, and literature were quite good. These strengths do not overcome the weaknesses expressed above.

The Controversial Issues Review Committee echoed the importance of a committee being convened to identify appropriate materials for this course.

CC/JC/EH

Attachments

Prepared by: Enid Hunter, Executive Director, Curriculum /Instructional Support

Approved by: Jan Christensen, Assistant Superintendent, Instruction