

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

MEMORANDUM #213 (2004-2005)

March 28, 2005

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES RECOMMENDATION: THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

RECOMMENDATION:

It is the Administration's recommendation that the School Board allow The House of the Spirits to remain on the approved list as a choice in the Advanced Placement (AP) Literature course, with the option to offer students who object to reading the book, an alternative selection.

PERTINENT FACTS:

The Controversial Issues Review Committee (CIRC) met on January 26, 2005, to review a complaint filed by a parent regarding the book, The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende (Attachment A). A brief summary of the minutes from that meeting is provided in Attachment B and a detailed verbatim transcript of the meeting is provided as Attachment C.

Based on the complaint and the parent's testimony at the CIRC meeting of January 26, 2005, the parent had the following concerns about the selected text:

- Physical and sexual violence against women, including the sexual molestation of a child, and numerous physical assaults of teenage girls.
- Various occult witchcraft practices
- Glamorization of prostitution
- Foul language
- Condescending view of Catholicism

The parent requested removal of this book from the approved list of AP instructional materials.

The majority of the members of the CIRC saw the text in a different light. Based on their discussion at the meeting on January 26, 2005, the following reasons emerged for retaining the book as an AP literature choice:

- This book is approved for use in an Advanced Placement (AP) Literature course and referenced in AP exams prepared by the College Board.
- This book was approved for AP Literature by the Language Arts Curriculum Committee and by the Anchorage School Board in 1998.
- This book was a resource used in an AP training event sponsored by College Board and attended by Ms. Berkowitz.
- AP Literature is a choice offered in the Anchorage School District Program of Studies and is not a requirement. The AP curriculum is college level coursework and the text and related assessments correspond to resources used in universities nationwide.
- Ms. Berkowitz selected this book to follow a study of *The Grapes of Wrath* as both represent the political, economic and social events of an era and are based on actual historical events. The Allende book represents a literary genre known as “Magical Realism” that is prominent in Latin American literature.
- *The House of the Spirits* is among the few choices of recommended and challenging literature that is written by a strong, female, minority author. The Allende book has strong ties to current events as the author’s family faced retaliation at the hands of the Pinochet regime.
- Other choices with similar theme and purpose are available for students who choose not to read this particular selection.

A vote taken by the committee resulted in a majority vote (7-2) to retain the House of the Spirits on the approved list of literature for Advanced Placement Literature, with the proviso that an alternative is available to students who object to reading the book.

Attachment A – Request for review from James Gudaitis

Attachment B – Summary of minutes of the January 26 meeting

Attachment C – Transcript of the January 26 meeting

Attachment D – Letter from Mary Alice Cook, CIRC Committee member

Attachment E – Letter from Kathryn Berkowitz, Bartlett AP teacher

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