

The Bronze Bow Informational Sheet for Parents

In Davidson Middle School's Advanced 7th Grade Core classes, required reading includes *The Bronze Bow*, by Elizabeth George Speare. Although the book is well-written, it has a strong and inappropriate religious bias. This sheet is intended to provide you with a simple, balanced view of the issue and who is involved, and to ask you to let your opinions be known.

What's Happening?

Our group of concerned parents and community leaders has asked Davidson to make the book *optional* reading (in the library) instead of *required* reading for all children in the classroom.

Who's Involved?

We're normal parents from mixed religious backgrounds with a healthy respect for the schools. We believe in public schools, think our kids have received a great education in this school system, and never expected to be in this situation. Some of us have long histories of volunteering in the school. Importantly, it's not just a few people. Other parents have voiced concerns in the past, though none have pushed the issue until now.

Community leaders have added their voices as well. They include Rabbis for the two main congregations in Marin, a prominent Presbyterian minister with a history of involvement at Davidson, and a nationally recognized First Amendment scholar (whose guidelines on religion in public schools have been sent to every school district in the nation by the Clinton and Bush administrations).

What's Wrong with the Book?

It promotes one religion over another. Making it required reading violates State standards and First Amendment requirements of religious neutrality in schools.

The book strongly promotes a Christian message while contrasting it with a biased and inaccurate image of Judaism. The author's intent, as explained in her Newbery Award acceptance speech (available at home.earthlink.net/~bronzebow/Speare%20acceptance%20speech.pdf), was to glorify Jesus and make him appealing to young people in her Sunday School class.

The Bronze Bow is the story of Daniel, a Jewish boy whose father was murdered by the Romans. Obsessed

with anger and revenge, he first joins a violent band of radicals, then encounters Jesus and his disciples. Jesus is radiantly portrayed with overwhelming charisma, while Jewish traditions are consistently denigrated as onerous to the poor and distorted so as to associate them with rigid laws and inequality. In the end, the protagonist makes a dramatic choice to accept Jesus, and suddenly all his problems are solved.

The book also contains passages suggesting that the Rabbis intended to kill Jesus. In so doing, this book promotes a religiously-based charge that is both extremely controversial, and directly responsible for 2,000 years of anti-Semitism.

We have great respect for Christian beliefs and do not want to offend anyone. However, this book is inappropriate for use as required reading because it uses a false picture of one religion in order to promote belief in another.

Is This "Book Banning"?

Absolutely not. We want the book to remain available in the library. As parents and community members, we just want to make sure that required reading material for our children is appropriate and not religiously biased – particularly when there are plenty of alternative books available that don't have these controversial aspects to them. That's not "banning", it's being "responsible".

Are Teachers Being Attacked?

No. We think the teachers who used this book were excellent and we don't believe they harbor any religious bias whatsoever. We've been lucky to have them in our kids' lives.

Does the Book Match State Standards?

No. The book doesn't meet the Department of Education's standards, which require that materials on religious matter "must remain neutral [and] must not advocate one religion over another." (See standards at home.earthlink.net/~bronzebow/State%20regulations.pdf.) It also mischaracterizes Judaism in ways that the Department of Education intentionally eliminated from recent history textbooks.

Is the Book Recommended by the State?

No. At one time it was on the State list of recommended literature for schools, but it is not on the current list. The Department of Education has informed us that books, like the Bronze Bow, that are not on the current list are not recommended by the State. Check it out yourself: www.cde.ca.gov/ci/rl/ll/ap/litsearch.asp
home.earthlink.net/~bronzebow/Donald%20Kairott%20letters.pdf

What Can Be Done?

Let's Find a More Appropriate Book. Leaving this book in the curriculum is simply not appropriate; this is a book that denigrates one religion to promote another. Any other solution leaves us with the potential for class reading groups to break down along religious lines. We have presented alternate books that focus far better on the unit's theme (Roman history) without raising divisive issues.

Are We Against Teaching About Religion?

Of course not. Today more than ever our children need to understand the world's diverse religious and cultural traditions. We need to be emphasizing common ground though, not taking sides. We must distinguish between teaching *facts* about religions and using books that *preach* the doctrines of one religion over another.

Why Wasn't This Resolved at Davidson?

We tried. We went to the 7th Grade Advanced Core teachers last spring (2006), but they didn't want to meet with us. We asked for a meeting with the principal in the spring, but were not granted one until a week after school was out. At that meeting, the principal cut short serious discussion by saying that his opinion didn't matter as he could do nothing anyway, and that we had to take our concerns to a higher level (the Curriculum Advisory Council). This ended any opportunities for meaningful dialogue on the book in that school year.

Is the Process Working?

We don't really know We presented our concerns to Davidson over six months ago. We were directed to the formal process of the District's Curriculum Advisory Council (CAC). At this point, we have still not had any substantive discussion about these issues with any school system representative. Constrictive procedural rules used by the CAC seem to limit its ability to engage in real dialogue with us and presumably will do the same in the future.

The make-up of the CAC and the absence of significant parent representation are also troubling. Of 18 members, 17 are district employees and only one is a

non-staff parent (not from middle school). In the hall after the meeting, the superintendent told us that she was certain the CAC was going to rule against us, suggesting their minds were made up before we even entered the door. This raises questions about the process and the lack of community involvement. We remain hopeful that clear-headed thinking will prevail, and that the CAC will do the right thing.

The next CAC meeting is scheduled for October 26, 2006 at 3:45 p.m. in the District's office in Terra Linda.

Is the Situation Escalating?

Unfortunately. At the CAC meeting, Davidson's principal compared us to Nazi sympathizers and Holocaust deniers demanding the removal of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. We've been repeatedly dismissed as "book banners," a misleading label that has been used as an excuse to avoid discussing this issue on its merits and that distorts our thoughts, goals, and concerns.

Can the Situation Improve?

Of course. Children and schools benefit greatly when parents and educators work closely together to ensure that public education supports societal values without undermining family and religious convictions.

What Can You Do?

Read the book. Davidson should have plenty of copies available.

Make Your Opinion Known. Let's have an intelligent, fair and open discussion, focused on what's best for our kids.

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If you want more information:

Educate yourself about these issues by reading support material and historical background at our websites: www.bronzebow.info and home.earthlink.net/~bronzebow/.

Or e-mail us

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