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Thursday, December 14, 2006

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Howell officials: Book not banned

Schools reviewing 'Freedom Writers Diary,' which was pulled over criticism.

Jon Zemke / Special to The Detroit News

HOWELL -- Schools officials tried to clear the air Wednesday, saying a book removed from a Howell High School English class for objectionable content has not been banned.

"The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and The World Around Them" was pulled from a advanced-placement English course on Monday after complaints by parents that the book's content includes foul language, rape, alcohol and drugs use.

"I just want to make it clear that this is not a banned book," said Jeanne Farina, assistant superintendent of curriculum. "This is a book that is going through the process of approval."

Cody Owens, 15, a sophomore in the English class, disagreed that the material was objectionable or too mature for high school students to handle.

"We hear that kind of stuff walking down the hallways so we didn't understand why it was bad to read it in a book," Owens said.

She said she was "pretty mad" the book has been pulled and that most of the class is also "very mad" because it brings up stereotypes about Howell being closed minded.

"Here in Howell we don't have much diversity so it was cool to see the lives of people in other parts of the world."

Farina said teacher Catherine Capy put the book on a reading list without approval from the school district's English Language Arts Committee. Capy could not be reached for comment.

Farina said the committee, which doesn't meet until May, is in the process of approving the book's inclusion in the curriculum. The book will not be used until a decision is made, Farina said.

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"The Freedom Writers Diary" is the true story of a first-year high school teacher in Long Beach, Calif., that teaches a class of "unteachable" kids using first-person account books, such as "The Diary of Anne Frank." The teacher in the book encouraged her students to write their own stories, which provided the material that Howell-area parents objected to, Farina said.

The book has been made into a movie and is expected to be released in January.

Marshall Kitchens, an English professor and the writing director at the University of Detroit Mercy, said taking a book away from students can backfire.

"It would actually encourage the students to go out and get the book," Kitchens said.

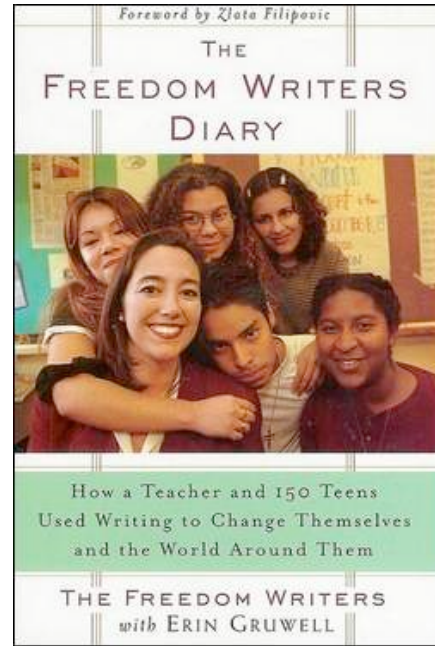
"Anything that is taboo, kids seem to want."

He said he has not read "The Freedom Writers Diary" but is familiar with it. In November, the Taylor School District pulled Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" after complaints about its liberal use of racial slurs.

Jon Zemke is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.


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