



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Decision on Challenged Language Arts Curriculum from Superintendent Mark Miller**

Juneau - As I am sure everyone is aware, a small, yet important portion of our newly adopted 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum has recently been challenged using the districts process for “challenged curriculum.” The challenge was written by Paul Berg and sponsored by Goldbelt Heritage Foundation. Mr. Berg’s thesis was well written and clearly articulated multiple objections to the curriculum based on, among other issues, lack of depth, failure to tell the story from multiple viewpoints, and lessening the impact that many of these events had on the Native culture. Our process requires that the committee, made up of teachers, librarians, site administrators and parents convene to review the materials and make a recommendation to the superintendent. This occurred during the week of November 17-21. The committee recommended, on a vote of 7-2 to remove the materials from our curriculum.

I have talked to many people about this issue and thank the dozens of people who have sent me e-mails, both pro and con, surrounding this most difficult decision. You can be assured I have spent more than one night tossing and turning as I weighed the merits on both sides of this issue. After much discussion and deliberation, I have decided to replace McGraw-Hill curriculum with one that the district, in collaboration with Goldbelt Heritage and Sealaska, will develop. This decision was not based on my determination that the curriculum is racist (although some feel strongly that it is), or that it is revisionist history (and some feel strongly that it is). I will leave those decisions and discussions to others. Instead, it is my belief that we can do better. The time that a teacher has with his/her students is limited and needs to be honored, respected and leveraged. We need to ensure that every instructional minute, every lesson, and every book is world class and meets the unique needs of our students. I don’t believe these books fit those criteria. Our students deserve better!

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If there is a positive outcome to this issue, it is that we now have a window of instructional time dedicated to the telling and understanding of the Native experience. We have the opportunity to experience living history before it is gone forever. We have the opportunity to tell the stories of those who lived the boarding school experience in the 40's, 50's, 60's and 70's. We have the opportunity to learn about the burial grounds on which Gastineau School was built and the removal of Native housing from the area that is now Sandy Beach. Our place is history, and we should take this opportunity to teach our children about it before the lessons are lost forever. This is the opportunity to teach our students that history is not either good or bad, but a mix of both. There is not one "Native Experience," there are thousands, each one uniquely different. I am calling on the community to come together with the school district to document and tell your truth, our students will be the better for it. Come into our classrooms to help us to teach our students about our local history.

Finally, I am directing that most of the copies of the current four titles in question be returned to the publisher with a letter explaining why the titles do not meet the needs of our students. A few copies of the books, however, will be shipped to, and stored at, the district office. Any student, with their parent's permission, who wishes to check out and read these books, may do so. Paul Berg's analysis of these books will also be included as a companion text. Education in a free and open society cannot be dogmatic. We must accept that others have opinions different than our own. A truly educated student cannot only defend their opinion, but can also explain the flaws in the arguments of the other side. Our students need to understand that other's views and opinions are not necessarily wrong or bad simply because they are different than our own. It is a hard concept for many adults to understand, and we must teach our students these concepts beginning in early adolescence.

The understanding of culture and race is a valid and important part of any student's education. Whether in Ferguson Missouri, Juneau Alaska, or anywhere in between, difficult conversations and debates need to occur. We are all products of both our own personal experiences as well as those of our ancestors. To paraphrase the late Dr. Walter Soboleff, "when we speak, others hear those in our clan who have come before us". Academic institutions, by their very nature, are an important forum in which to have these conversations and debates. As a community Juneau is in a special and unique place to move this work forward. As superintendent, I intend to help lead this work. This is an opportunity for our community to do something special and meaningful as we educate our students to live in a world that continues to be more integrated and diverse than ever before.

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