

Dear BUSD Families, Students, and Employees:

Given the nature of the complaints that I received about our core novels (the list of novels that can be required reading for all students) and the broader discussions we are having as a district about diversity, equity, and inclusion, I am sharing my response to these complaints with the entire BUSD community.

The complaints raised regarding the books have allowed us to examine why we mandate these books. When these books were selected they were not intentionally selected to guide us through conversations of race and racism. In addition, the complaints have created the space to have brave conversations, not just about the books in question, but also about our district's policies, practices, and culture. In my opinion, the number one goal of American public education is to provide access and opportunity to all students. We must constantly review our educational system to ensure we are making progress towards this goal. Only in doing so can we actually face what must be changed.

BUSD's Journey of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As racial unrest spread throughout the country this spring, BUSD's Board of Education also engaged in conversations around what it means to take an anti-racist stance in our work. The Board recognizes, as do I, that the only way to engage in brave conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion is to acknowledge and actively stand against institutional and structural racism. To this end, BUSD's Board of Education recently made this step through the adoption of the following Anti-Racist Statement:

The Burbank Unified School District officially denounces racism as the product of White default/supremacy culture and recognizes the impact of systemic and generational racism as traumatic to our country, community, and school district. In light of continuing racial violence, including the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Andres Guardado, Dijon Kizzee, and many others, we also recognize that Black people in this country have had a unique and traumatic history in terms of racial relations, equality, and equity. We stand with the truthful and humane statement that all lives cannot matter until Black lives and the lives of indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) matter. We are taking steps to actively work towards being fully anti-racist, not only in word, but also in policy, practice, and accountability. Change is rarely easy, but with the support and cooperation of the entire Burbank school community we know that we will reflect a district that is truly unified.

This anti-racist statement and stance demand that we both acknowledge our past harm and critically examine our choices and approaches. As it relates to the books in question, several individuals have emailed me stating that we should not erase history by removing these books from our core novel list. I agree that we must acknowledge our country and city's history of racism. For example, Burbank must acknowledge and come to terms with its past as a "Sundown Town." We also must acknowledge that we still have challenges that we must address. The only way to truly heal and move forward is to acknowledge our past. At the same

time, we must be critical and examine what core curriculum we use to understand our history, especially when we are discussing race and racism. As I reviewed the complaints, our newly developed commitment to taking an anti-racist stance helped guide me through the process.

Complaint Process

Given the complexity of this situation, I formed a Committee (consisting of teachers, parents, administrators, and a student representative) on October 14, 2020 to review the complaints regarding the following books: *The Cay*; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; and *Of Mice and Men*. The remedy sought in the complaints is the same for each of the novels—remove it from being a mandatory assignment for the entire class of students. The goal of the Committee was to reach consensus on a recommendation and response to the complaints; however, the Committee did not reach consensus. Therefore, I have reviewed all of the passionate and candid points of view presented in the discussions.

I provided the Committee with two guiding questions to focus their work:

1. Are these the best books? Do they match the educational philosophy of the district? Is this the best curriculum to teach complicated topics such as race and racism?
2. For our Black students negatively impacted by these books, how do we address the harm and trauma caused to them?

Are these the best books?

I left this question broad because I wanted us to reflect on why we have been teaching these books for so many years. None of us has a clear answer to this question given the fact that the school board mandated these books over 30 years ago. We cannot find the criteria they used to select the books and we have not completed a comprehensive review since. The main responses given for teaching these books are that they are award-winning American novels; they touch on topics of race and racism; they have teachable moments; and they teach us about American history. It is important to note that many people could argue that several other books meet the same criteria.

Personally, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of my favorite books, but that should not be the criterion for mandating teachers to teach the book and requiring all students to read it. As a White male, I read several of the same core novels in predominately White classrooms. My experience with these core novels was completely different from our current Black students who are reading these books in predominately White classrooms. Reading the books as a White male of privilege did not cause me harm or trauma; however, Black students must navigate the use of difficult language and stereotypes, and frequently must shoulder the burden of being the spokesperson for all Black people in their class or community. As a school district, we need to establish clear criteria for why we make some books mandatory and others optional.

As the complaints point out, these books are problematic in the following ways: they repeatedly use the n-word; they cast Black people in negative, hopeless, and secondary roles; and all but one are written from the lens of a White author. As our teachers, administrators, students, and parents have all agreed, we need to diversify our reading list. Our current book list highlights the danger of a single story.

Use of the n-word

People have questioned if I should be in the position to make this decision about the use of the n-word, since I am White. I agree, because as a White man I will never truly understand the impact of that word. That is why I have spent a lot of time listening to our Black students and parents and researching this topic. As I type this, I can hear the pain in the voices of the Black families as they shared with me the stories about how the n-word was yelled repeatedly at their families and ancestors. They have described the stories of that toxic word being spewed at their family members as they were raped and murdered. They also shared present-day stories of people driving by in their cars and yelling the n-word at them and their family as they walked down the street.

The n-word is a vile and hateful word that continues to be used to dehumanize Black people. This word helps to contribute to generational trauma. This trauma can be transferred from the first generation of trauma survivors to the second and further generations of offspring of the survivors via complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms. I ask us, how do we address the trauma that can be caused by these books in a classroom? As one teacher shared, “We do not know. We have not been given the opportunity to figure out how. We absolutely cannot even begin to do so without a strong district policy and a comprehensive plan to change a culture and a mindset. Frankly, none of us here, including our superintendent (sp), knows how to answer that question.” I completely agree with this sentiment, yet we continue to teach these books year after year for over 30+ years.

Committee Summary

Throughout this process, everyone has agreed that our current curriculum does not represent Black student and families in a positive and uplifting manner. What is worse, many have acknowledged that these books contribute to perpetuating generational trauma.

While the Committee did not reach consensus about removing the books from required instruction, the Committee did agree on the following points:

- Ban the use of, and reading of, the n-word in all classes, regardless of context.
- Update our core novel list to include books written by authors who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).
- Offer professional development to our teachers to help facilitate conversations about race and racism at school, about implicit bias, and to affirm students’ racial identities and cultural histories in curricula.

- Create a third list of books that are appropriate for a classroom and/or school library that students can choose to read independently, or in small groups. These books would not be read aloud or taught to the whole class.

After reviewing the documents, I conclude that the main point of disagreement within the Committee was centered on one main point. Namely, teachers want the books to remain on the supplemental list (which means individual teachers can mandate all students must read the book). Teachers are concerned about losing academic freedom; however, teachers acknowledge that something needs to change with our current practice. As stated in the findings, “teachers, after listening to the compelling statements from the parents, are well aware that something has to be changed in order to protect our Black students from injury.” In addition to the remedies mentioned above, they recommended the following additional remedies so that the books may stay on the supplemental reading list:

- Mandate training for all teachers who want to teach these books.
- Balance the novels with others that show a balanced and fuller representation of the Black experience.

Decision

We can and we should do better. After reading all of the statements, I do not agree the remedies named above by the teachers and Committee members will prevent the harm and trauma caused when these books are taught in a predominately non-Black classroom by predominately non-Black teachers.

For me, this comes down to a human rights issue. At their last meeting, the School Board passed a resolution supporting Human Rights Day on December 10. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. Article 26 (2) of the UDHR is explicit about education:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Our Black students and families are telling us that our current curriculum is not meeting this expectation. How can we ignore them? In addition, how can we pass an Anti-Racist statement and not back it up with action?

I have decided the only remedy is to move these five books to a third list of books. The books will no longer be core or supplemental, meaning that they cannot be required as mandatory reading for all students. However, the books are appropriate for a classroom library and students can choose to read them independently or in small groups. The books would not be

read aloud or taught to the whole class. In addition, starting immediately, we are banning the use of, and reading of the n-word in all classes, regardless of context. This is not about censorship or banning books outright, this is about determining which books are mandatory and which books are optional.

Next Steps

I whole-heartedly agree with a statement submitted by one of our teachers, “Why doesn’t the district ever listen to their teachers who are professional and forward thinking? If they had only adopted one new book (which reflects the current demographic of BUSD students) over the past 14 years, we would not be in this position. Why not be ahead of the game for once?” The time is now for the Burbank Unified School District to work with our teachers to do better. Our teachers and administrators are amazing professionals. We need to allow them to lead the process to select new books. We must work with them to take the following actions:

1. Work with our teachers and administrators to establish a clear rationale and criteria for why we designate books as core novels. As the Committee suggested, we can incorporate resources from *Looking Critically at a Curricular Unit*, *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)*, *The Conscious Kid*, and other resources to guide our work. At a minimum, these criteria should answer the following questions:
 - Do these books create access and opportunity for all students—particularly for groups of students, such as Black students, who have been historically left out of the curriculum?
 - Do these books create a climate of inclusion for all students—particularly for groups of students, such as Black students, who have been historically left out of the curriculum?
 - Who wrote the curriculum?
 - Who published the curriculum?
 - What was their personal experience with the topic?
 - What lens did they use when they wrote their book?
2. Select new core novels based on the newly establish criteria.
3. Establish a process to review our reading list on a frequent basis. This review should take place at least every eight years or when we adopt new curriculum.
4. Provide professional development so that we are all better prepared to discuss race and racism at school.
5. Continue with the multiple aspects of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work by working with teachers, students, parents, administrators, and classified staff.

While this has been a difficult process and conversation, I am optimistic that if we continue to listen to all voices, we have a great opportunity ahead of us. I want to echo what one of our

teachers said, "I look forward to working together to create a meaningful, uplifting, and academically challenging experience for every Burbank Unified student."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matt Hill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "M" and "H".

Matt Hill, Ed.D.
Superintendent