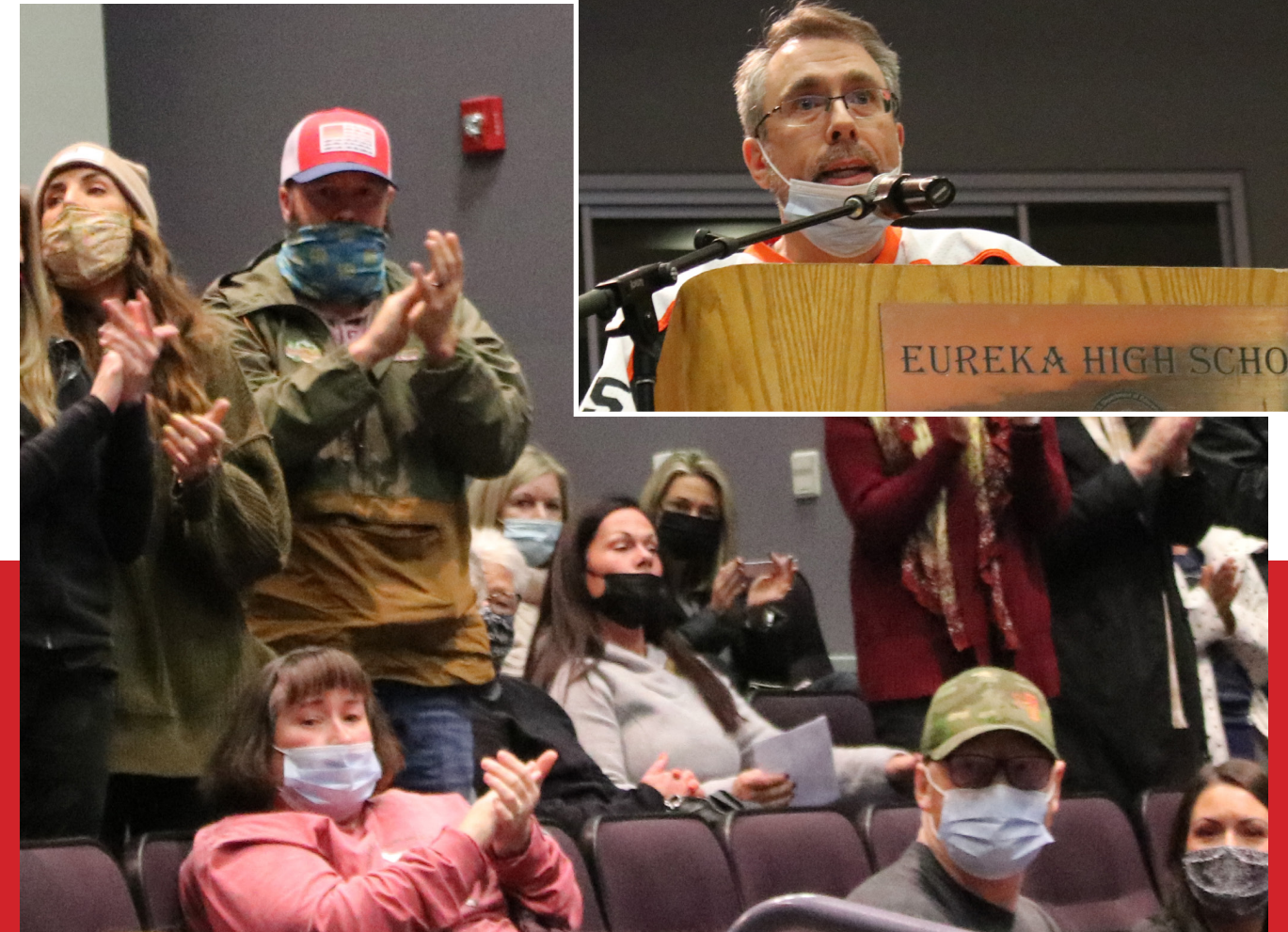


- “Where I End and You Begin” by Preston Norton
- “Gender Queer” by Maia Kobabe
- “All Boys Aren’t Blue” by George M. Johnson
- “The Haters” by Jesse Andrews
- “Crank” by Ellen Hopkins
- “Looking for Alaska” by John Green
- “This One Summer” by Mariko Tamaki
- “Heroin” by Mindy McGinnis
- “The Breakaways” by Cathy G. Johnson

50% of book challenges are made by parents



At the Thursday, Nov. 18, Board of Education (BOE) meeting, parents attended to voice their concerns regarding a variety of topics. A few parents applauded at the close of each comment. Jason Moore, RSD parent, spoke up about his dislike of the materials being taught at schools. “I did not feel comfortable reading what I saw,” Moore said at the meeting. “Rethink how this district is being led.” Photographs by Marin Ellington

Parents have put several books in RSD school libraries under official review, claiming they contain pornography and references to violence and drugs

Under Review

stephanie LEI • arpatha SISTLA

Since the start of the semester, 12 library books have been challenged at the district level by students’ parents under various concerns including language, drugs, sexual content, LGBTQ+ representation, violence and police brutality.

“It’s interesting because there are lots of different reasons why people challenge books, so there’s never really a complete pattern to it,” Dr. Shelley Willott, RSD director of curriculum, said. “Everyone’s a little bit different, and it just depends on that person’s perspective and what they believe about that piece of material.”

Dr. Willott said there have been more book challenges this semester than her entire eight years in RSD. None of these books are required reading but rather they are books available to students in the library.

As of Dec. 15, three committees have chosen to “retain without restriction” for the material they reviewed which allows students full access.

During the Thursday, Nov. 18, Board of Education (BOE) meeting, several parents were given the opportunity to voice their concerns regarding the process of challenging books and the books themselves.

Christian Eldridge, RSD parent, is concerned about the content of the books available to students in libraries, specifically those with pornography and sexual content.

“It represents an alarming agenda that targets youth hiding behind virtuous words such as diversity and inclusion,” Eldridge said during patron comments at the BOE meeting. “We must welcome children of all identities into our libraries and there are plenty of books that do that. What I am deeply concerned about is the large number of books sitting on our library shelves with the agenda of sexually ruining our children.”

Librarian Perspective

Brittany Sharitz, librarian, said none of the book challenges have come from MHS parents. “These challenges have all been from parents who have students at different levels,” Sharitz said. “But I think those parents are just looking ahead and thinking about when their students will become high school age, what they’ll have access to.”

Sharitz is on the book challenge committee that reviews “Crank” by Ellen Hopkins and “Looking For Alaska” by John Green.

While Sharitz understands that having multiple perspectives and dialogue over the library books is important, she said if students are ever bothered by content they find, they can choose not to read it.

“Librarians know that not all books are intended for every reader, but we also strive to meet the needs of a very diverse group of students. The maturity, interests and life experiences of students can vary greatly,” Sharitz said. “Content that seems too mature for some students could actually reflect the experiences of others and provide comfort in troubling times.”

Sharitz said librarians consider the merits of a book during the purchasing process, and thus, she does not think books should be banned. Sharitz is a trained professional with 12 years of teaching experience and has completed a 42 credit hour master’s program in order to become a librarian.

“We definitely make judgment calls on what is appropriate and what isn’t appropriate for school libraries,” Sharitz said. “We’re using discretion to decide what should be in here and what shouldn’t.”

Student Perspective

Aadhya Subhash, senior, talked about the issue of banning books from school during an AP Literature discussion for “Native Son” by Richard Wright.

“One of the best things about reading books that do contain sensitive topics is we’re being exposed to problems that really do affect real-world situations,” Subhash said. “Rather than being sheltered by it, it’s better to receive a formal education like this, so we’re not just navigating through this in our home, but with the help of teachers and other educational material.”

Subhash said parents may be concerned that books with violence or sensitive topics such as assault or drug usage have a negative impact on their child.

“I think parents can obviously restrict what books they want their children to read, but they shouldn’t restrict them from everyone else,” Subhash said.

Author Perspective

One of the 12 books being challenged in RSD is “Heroin” by Mindy McGinnis. McGinnis spoke to students at MHS earlier this year.

One reason parents in the district have requested this book to be removed from school libraries is that “the content of the book is inappropriate for children of school age through twelfth grade.”

McGinnis, however, said that according to the CDC, heroin use more than doubled among young adults ages 18–25 in the past decade.

“Real talk has to happen with teens about

drug abuse, prescription drug misuse, and the very real dangers of casual drug use before they turn 18, exactly the period of time and the window of opportunity that the statement would deny,” McGinnis said.

McGinnis said banning books from school libraries has a greater significance.

“It’s a black mark, a patina of shame,” McGinnis said. “It tells kids who are dealing with these topics - whatever they are - in their daily lives, that they are wrong, shameful and dirty. This does not encourage anyone to speak up or seek help. It encourages them to keep their heads down, bury pain and live in emotional isolation as they pretend to fit in, be normal and abide by a social code that others have pushed upon them.”

While McGinnis said all voices should be heard and that she understands parental concerns, she asks adults to trust educators, librarians and other institutions.

“If a parent says, ‘this book is not appropriate for my child,’ they are right,” McGinnis said. “When a parent says, ‘this book is not appropriate for any child,’ we’re in censorship territory.”

Laura Saggat, RSD parent, is part of the committee in charge of challenging “Heroin.” As president of Wildwood Middle School’s PTO, Saggat was asked to join the committee as a parent leader in the district.

“Books are windows into how other people live,” Saggat said.

Saggat said the value in students reading such books is that they may spark discussion with their parents and other trusted adults. Rather than glorifying drug usage, she said, Heroin tells a story that warns students of the dangers of drug addiction.

Restriction Process

1. Parents must first speak with their student’s teacher or librarian.
2. The librarian then restricts the student’s access to the particular book.
3. If the parent still feels the issue is unresolved, they can talk with the principal.

Challenge Process

1. In the case where the parent wants the book completely removed, they must fill out the challenged material forms.
2. RSD then forms a committee consisting of teachers, librarians and students to review the book’s content and determine if it will be removed from school libraries.
3. The committee’s decision is presented to the Board of Education for final approval.

Supreme Court Cases

Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District

This 1976 case ruled that a library in a public school is created to benefit students and its content cannot be taken away by school boards because they disapprove of content.

Board of Education vs. Pico

This 1982 case ruled that petitioners cannot extend their discretion further than the classroom environment to the library and the content that is stored in it.

Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education

This 1987 case ruled that religious themes taught in required reading is not required worship and is open to individual interpretation.

Q&A

Mindy McGinnis, Edgar Award-winning author of the challenged book ‘Heroin’, shares her perspective



WHAT AUDIENCES DO YOU THINK YOUR BOOK “HEROIN” IS APPROPRIATE FOR?

“Humans. Anyone looking for empathy and compassion in the world. Anyone hoping to be understood. Anyone wondering how easy it is to fall down a rabbit hole, and anyone who has ever considered the fact that it could be them one day.”

WHAT POWER SHOULD PARENTS HAVE IN CENSORING THE READING OF HIGH SCHOOLERS BEYOND THEIR OWN CHILD?

“Trust the readers themselves. I worked in a high school library for 14 years. Teens and young readers DO self-censor. I’ve seen plenty of kids pick up a book, page through it and be like, ‘Woah! Okay... not for me.’ They put it down. They move on.”

WHO DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR DECISIONS REGARDING BANNING BOOKS?

“Most schools have a great process for dealing with challenged books. Of course, all voices should be heard. Parents have real concerns about what their children are exposed to, and raising their children is their most important job. Listening is also critical, and in a time when most public discourse has been demeaned to slugging matches where the winner has the best one-liner and everyone has a pie chart to refute someone else’s bar graph, actually being quiet and considering the other person’s point no longer seems essential to arriving at a decision.”

See full interview online

