

BV parents' challenge to film at school fails, but policies reviewed

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BERRYVILLE -- At last week's Berryville School Board meeting, Paul and Danyelle Harris were joined by several other individuals who came to present a case that the 1996 film representation of "Romeo + Juliet" should not be shown in Berryville schools.

A reconsideration panel had recently rejected a challenge to the film's inclusion in the school's library after the film was shown to ninth graders.

Paul Harris presented the appeal to the board. What was scheduled for five minutes of presentation, ended up as nearly an hour of questions and answers between local residents and the school board.

The 1996 film, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, contains drug use, sexual innuendo and strong violence. The board voted 4 to 3 to deny the appeal.

Danyelle Harris said of the decision, "The board stated they were going to 'stand by their teachers and staff and keep 'Romeo + Juliet' even though members of the board said they couldn't fairly vote since they had never seen the movie for themselves."

Harris was not only disappointed in the vote but also in the challenge process, which she believes did not follow what the district policy dictates.

She said she understood that after she filed her challenge with the librarian that she would be asked to attend the meeting and speak her case.

She wasn't aware that the meeting to consider her challenge had occurred without her until she received the letter denying her challenge.

According to Harris, "The librarian admitted at the (school board) meeting that she should have invited us to the meeting, but the school board did not pick this detail up, seemingly."

Harris contended in an interview that since the board is elected to represent parents and the community, they should have viewed the material for themselves so they could make an informed opinion instead of simply taking the administration's word for it in its defense of the material.

"They may have made the same decision, but at least we would know they took the challenge seriously," said another parent after the meeting.

The board trusted the administration, and Harris said she probably would have too when her daughter came home from school in March and told her that she would be watching the film at school the next day. But what happened earlier in the year with another film threw up a red flag with the Harris family.

Early in the first semester of the school year, Harris' daughter came home from school and told her mom they were watching the 1990 film version of "Lord of the Flies."

The film is rated R for strong language and intense violence and subject matter. Harris contacted the school to find out why the 13- and 14-year-old kids were watching an R-rated film. She asked why parents hadn't been notified ahead of time.

The film was shown over a three-day span, and although some school officials have said the students didn't see the entire movie, students have reported that they finished viewing the entire film.

Harris said that in March when her daughter brought up "Romeo + Juliet", she would probably have shrugged it off like most would, trusting that the Berryville school system would review the movie as age appropriate. She would assume any questionable content would be cut out or skipped, but after the Lord of the Flies incident, she decided to check things out.

She and her husband rented the film themselves and watched it. They weren't happy at all with what they saw, so she went to the school and got the permission slip that was given to her daughter. According to Harris, it stated that the movie would be viewed and that it was rated PG-13, but it gave no supporting information on why the movie had that rating so a parent might be able to make a more informed decision.

In addition, Harris noted, it gave parents less than 24 hours' notice to make a decision as to whether their children could watch the film in question.

Harris was also upset that the slip was not a permission slip, but an opt-out letter. A signature was required if you wanted your child to be allowed out of the film. Her daughter was sent to the library and was given an alternate assignment.

Harris told Carroll County News that outside of the "Romeo + Juliet" challenge, her meetings with Principal Randal Betts and Superintendent Randy Byrd have been shifted into an attempt to get the administration's attention focused on their movie policy -- to clarify it, to get parents focused on it, and if needed, to change it.

She understands that parents are busy, and that parenting styles are as different as tastes and tolerances, but she firmly believes that the school district should be diligent in providing each parent the chance to make informed decisions on which movies their children are shown in school.

Harris has asked for notice of movies that a teacher plans to show in a semester be given out at the beginning of the semester.

She wants notice a week before a movie is shown that provides the name, year, rating and why it received that rating, along with the educational objective of the movie. She wants all that on a permission slip that the child must have signed in order to view the movie. Harris said she is satisfied that the district does allow alternate assignments for children who don't see a film.

Byrd said that he has listened to the concerns addressed and suggestions made by Mr. and Mrs. Harris and he has taken steps to address them. First was the "Lord of the Flies" incident which he says never should have happened. School policy states that rated R movies should never be shown to a student. It will not be shown again. He also said that he would be meeting with the staff to go over the existing policies. No more movies unless they are being used for an educational purpose with a lesson objective and approval by administration. Permission slips will be sent days in advance to allow parents more time to inform themselves on a work, and will have more information that will give parents a heads up if something the child might see may be troublesome. As for a movie list at the beginning of a semester, he said that probably wouldn't happen.

"Whenever a parent comes to us with a concern, we try to listen." said Byrd. He said that the Harris family

had valid concerns over parental notification, and that movies shown in school should be part of lesson plans and not merely rewards.

Byrd said that as young people move closer to adulthood, they will encounter adult themes in books and movies. The school administration has to weigh the education and enrichment value of each work against the objectionable content within the work.

With "Romeo and Juliet" the Shakespearean play, there is teen sex. A student cannot learn this work without dealing with it, he noted. The district has affirmed that the 1996 film version's educational benefits outweighed the drugs, sex and violence it was presented with. On that, the school district and the Harris family will disagree.

The school will decide where they must draw a line with content, and they offer the reconsideration committee as a chance to challenge their judgment, the superintendent said. But according to Byrd, the Berryville School District agrees that parents should be given the chance to decide where they draw the line for their own kids, and they are taking steps to help that happen.

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