

WINNERS of the Hildene Lincoln Essay Competition, 2023

Hildene received 198 submissions from around the state to this year's Lincoln Essay Competition. A first, second, and third place winner was chosen from each of four regions and four honorable mentions were selected from the combined pool of finalists. If you are one of the applicants, whether or not your essay garnered an award, you are to be congratulated for engaging in the process.

Encouraging civil civic discourse, especially around difficult subjects, is a key part of Hildene's mission. In this year's competition, students considered the delicate topic of censorship. Across the United States, the number of book challenges (attempts to remove or restrict access to a book based on its content) has increased dramatically—despite the fact that schools and libraries employ specific policies and procedures for choosing materials to include in their collections and curricula.

PROMPT:

Choose a book, in consultation with a parent or guardian, from the Shortlist of Challenged Books* and read it, if you have not already. Imagine that there is a request to remove this book from your local public library, school library, or 8th-grade classroom and that you, as a student, have been asked to give your opinion about how the school or library should respond. First, identify at least one reason why someone might challenge this book. Second, state what action(s) you think the school or library should take in response to the challenge. Third, give two distinct, well-explained reasons why this is an appropriate response. Finally, describe what you think the potential long-term impacts of your recommendation would be if it were implemented.

*see packet for list

Congratulations to the following winners!

Region One: Grand Isle, Franklin, Orleans, Essex, Lamoille, Caledonia, Washington Counties

First Place, \$500

Harmony Belle Devoe

Harmony advocated for keeping Finding Junie Kim, by Ellen Oh, on the library shelf because Vermont needs more books that raise awareness about racism and that help Asian American students like her feel represented. "Books centering on diversity have a special place in my heart...", writes Devoe. "I'm seldom sure where I fit in, but books are a way to enter a whole new world of imagination, and I tend to choose books I feel culturally connected to. If books like Finding Junie Kim were taken out of my library, I'd feel even more marginalized."

Harwood Union Middle School, Moretown; Teacher: Jon Potts

Second Place, \$400

Emma Aither

Emma proposed that rather than banning Ghost Boys, by Jewell Parker Rhodes, the town or library should host community conversations with guest speakers to increase awareness about racism and hate. This is an important book, Aither writes, "about the injustices happening in our

world right now. It is a good example of how things are and how much we need to improve.”
Harwood Union Middle School, Moretown; Teacher: Sarah Ibson

Third Place, \$300

James Michelle Shenk

James wrote about the critical need to keep books like Melissa, by Alex Gino, accessible to all students to provide opportunity for transgender representation and discussion. “In a world that seems intent on erasing anyone who doesn’t fit its definition of perfect,” they write, “Melissa is something different in children’s literature, showing that everything isn’t perfect, and that’s okay.”

Crossett Brook Middle School, Duxbury; Teacher: Sarah Peruzzi

Region Two: Chittenden County

First Place, \$500

Oonagh Guyer

Oonagh recommended that instead of banning books that deal with difficult topics (such as Thirteen Reasons Why, by Jay Asher, which deals with suicide), “middle-grade libraries should require parental permission slips for the children to read [them].” Having parents be a part of the decision-making might help them to feel more involved in their children’s education, Guyer advises. She states that, “the reality is that books create perfect opportunities to start a dialogue with their kids...that having these hard conversations can help prevent suicide.”

Vermont Day School, Shelburne; Teacher: Justin Kane

Second Place, \$400

Esta Mwibelega

Esta wrote about the importance of keeping Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You, by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds, accessible to 8th graders, instead of assuming that they are not mature enough to handle the content. Esta shared that, as a Black student, reading this book made her feel heard. “The reality is that eighth graders experience racism at a young age,” she writes, “which means they can handle this book and its topics.”

Edmunds Middle School, Burlington; Teacher: Richard Boyers

Third Place, \$300

Jesse Kim

Jesse recommended that Maus, by Art Spiegelman, remain accessible to students and that a productive response to assuage the concerns of possible challengers would be to “require students below a certain age or grade level to request permission from their parents or guardians.” As a graphic novel, Kim argues that Maus provides an accessible format and vital resource for teaching about the Holocaust so that history does not repeat itself. This is critical, Kim wrote, since a recent study showed that, of the Americans polled, “63%...did not know that six million Jews were killed, and...11% of millennial and Gen Z respondents said they believe Jews caused the Holocaust.”

Vermont Day School, Shelburne; Teacher: Justin Kane

Region Three: Addison, Rutland, Bennington Counties

First Place, \$500

Quinn Loose

Pointing to the American Library Assoc.'s defense of intellectual freedom, Quinn advocates for keeping New Kid, by Jerry Craft, accessible at her school. She would recommend that a meeting be held with the community to discuss the importance of learning about different viewpoints in literature. "In a time of turmoil in the country," Quinn writes, "having the next generation be accepting of each other is vital..."

Long Trail School, Dorset; Teacher: Stacey Allen

Second Place, \$400

Aila Malay

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson, shouldn't be banned for mature content, Aila wrote, "since the unfortunate truth is that this same scenario happens in schools today, as one in four girls will be sexually abused before they turn eighteen...[It] can show survivors...that they are not alone. Armed with this knowledge, they can reach out to those around them and get the help they need—silencing voices does nothing to help victims."

Otter Valley Union Middle/High School, Brandon; Teacher: Cameron Perta

Third Place, \$300

Evan Miksis

Evan wrote in favor of keeping All American Boys, by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, on the shelves, believing it helps to "[set] our next generation up with education on the topic of police brutality and racism...In order to make a change, people need the opportunity to speak out as silence will get us nowhere."

Long Trail School, Dorset; Teacher: Deb MacDonald

Region Four: Orange, Windsor, Windham Counties

First Place, \$500

Lylah Swan Zeitlin

Balancing "the innate parental desire to protect their children and the need for education on the tragedies of the Holocaust," Lylah recommends that her school do the following in the event that Maus, by Art Spiegelman, were challenged by a parent: keep the book accessible while providing a debriefing to those who wish to read it, and facilitate a conference with worried parents to address specific concerns. Zeitlin warns that "comfort shouldn't take precedence over the truth...We read harder books to become better readers; we read sadder books to become better people."

Woodstock Union High School, Woodstock; Teacher: Erin Hanrahan

Second Place, \$400

Ella Swett

Swett writes that while "some people may argue that the traumas discussed in Fighting Words, [by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley]—particularly sexual assault—are not appropriate issues to include in a book for young readers," it is still important to keep it on the shelves. "The sad reality is that many young people...will have experienced a childhood trauma of some kind...nearly two-thirds." The characters' stories "may bring solace to young readers who need to understand that they are not the only ones to have gone through similar

challenges. Readers who have not experienced trauma themselves likely know someone who has, so reading the book could help them build understanding and empathy.”

Upper Valley Waldorf School, Quechee; Teacher: Devon Abbey

Third Place, \$300

Lauren Chute

“Books are powerful. They can make you feel exuberant, heartbroken, or furious...They are both threatening and important,” writes Chute. While she recommends putting a warning on Melissa, by Alex Gino, that the book is best suited for fourth graders and up, she believes that it should stay on the shelves. “Kids need to read this...to learn that even if someone is different, they should still support them.” Moreover, “transgender kids will feel included and accepted if they have access to Melissa.”

Putney Central School, Putney; Teacher: Amanda Dixon

4 Honorable Mentions, \$200 each

Bellamy Crehan

Bellamy supports keeping Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson, accessible to all. “People think that rape is something that should be locked away,” Crehan writes, “and that by preventing kids from reading about it, they are being protected. But I think it’s the opposite. How will kids learn about it, if not from stories about it? Reading books like Speak empowers people, changes minds, and creates a future without injustice.”

Edmunds Middle School, Burlington; Teacher: Terrence Richards

Callie Beyor

Callie strongly advocates for keeping Ghost Boys, by Jewell Parker Rhodes, accessible, because, “if students are taught about respecting each other’s stories, races, ethnicities, and even religious backgrounds, they are less likely to judge and hurt one another...[Ghost Boys talks about putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and understanding where they are coming from.”

Georgia Elementary School, St. Albans; Teacher: Logan St. Peter

Eva Lord

Eva cautions against removal of The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, by Sherman Alexie, from the shelves, writing, “Censorship breeds ignorance which allows others to determine for you what is right and what is wrong.” She continues, “Hard things are unavoidable. Shutting down people’s ability to talk about them hurts everyone.”

Putney Central School, Putney; Teacher: Amanda Dixon

Root Rosenberg

Root recommends that in addition to keeping The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, by Sherman Alexie, on the shelves, school administrators should engage students in conversations about why the book is important. Students need to be exposed to new perspectives on Native People, Rosenberg writes, and they “must learn the danger of the single story.” They hope it will also spark curiosity in Vermonters to learn more about indigenous people in our state.

Hilltop Montessori School, Brattleboro; Teacher: Ani Schaeffer