Monday, October 28, 2019

Dear MSAAC Community,

According to the Children’s Cooperative Book Center, only 10% of children’s books feature people of color or are written by people of color. Yet people of color comprise nearly 40% of Loudoun County’s population. If we take a random selection of 100 books and 100 children – both from our public schools – and ask those children to find a book in which they see themselves depicted, forty children would share ten books. Sixty children would not only have their own book, but there would be books to spare.

And so, the Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee welcomed the announcement of the diverse classroom libraries. This past August, as the Ad Hoc Committee on Equity gathered its findings, Dr. Williams released a strong statement condemning systemic racism within Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS), and MSAAC waited for action. *Facta non verba.* Words without action are useless. With the purchase of books specifically chosen to increase diverse titles, LCPS is, at last, making visible steps toward achieving equity for all our students.

If you have never thought about the importance of representation in books, most likely you are part of the 60% who are in the 90% of books. Representation matters – both for the 40% and the 60%. Representation in literature matters for the 40% of students who are people of color. Students who cannot see themselves in literature feel marginalized. In fact, they are marginalized. Representation of minorities in literature matters for the 60% of students who are not in the minority. For some students, literature is their only window into the lives of people who are not like them.

Diversity is not, however, only about race. To have a diverse library, children who are LGBTQ or who live with same-sex parents must be able to see themselves as well. These children are not even afforded 10% of children’s books. It is therefore disappointing that books with LGBTQ themes are being challenged. According to LCPS, fewer than 4% of the books selected deal with gender identity or sexual orientation. Challengers are taking passages from books for older students and using the sexual content in those passages to fearmonger about all LGBTQ books. MSAAC supports reviewing certain books for ‘leveling’, that is determining the appropriateness of material for specific ages – certainly one would not give *The Scarlet Letter* to a kindergarten student.

*The Scarlet Letter* is not currently being challenged even though premarital sex is integral to the plot. Yet books selected as part of the classroom diversity collection with premarital sex are being challenged. It cannot be a coincidence that the challenged books are by people of color or contain LGBTQ-themes. A biography of Harvey Milk has been challenged because it is about an
openly gay man. Removing that book causes no harm to Harvey Milk. It is easy to silence a dead man. Removal of his biography will harm students. Removing a biography of Milk because he was gay tells LGBTQ students that we wish to silence and erase them. Removing a biography of Milk because he was gay tells all students that it is acceptable to silence and erase those who are not like us.

The Loudoun County School Board has entrusted the Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee to promote the needs of minority students and to help build a school system that is culturally and socially competent and positioned to provide fair and equitable learning experiences for all students. As such, MSAAC strongly urges and recommends that LCPS continue its commitment to building book collections that reflect the lives of all our students.

MSAAC Executive Board