School Urged to Remove *Huckleberry Finn* from Curriculum

By Dan Wascoe  
Star Tribune (MCT)

MINNEAPOLIS--Ken Gilbert read the story of Huckleberry Finn in the late 1960s in a segregated black North Carolina school, but he doesn't remember much about Huck's adventures and the book's status as an American classic.

What he does remember is class discussions of the "N-word." Mark Twain used it over and over.

"Why were there so many usages of the same word?" he said. "We never got to the story line. It was the racial issue."

When daughter Nia was assigned to read it in her 10th-grade honors class, his memories of a racially volatile childhood came surging back.

Now Gilbert and his wife, Sylvia, are reviving a century-old debate by asking St. Louis Park High to remove the novel from the required-reading list.

While controversy over the novel dates back to the 1880s, debate over use of the N-word by schools, theaters and even black entertainers continues to make news.

He does not seek to ban the book from the school. "I don't care if all of America reads the book," he said, but he doesn't want it to be required classroom reading.

A 12-member committee of teachers, parents, a community member and a school administrator reviewed the Gilberts' request. According to a letter to parents from Principal Robert Laney, the group decided that although some of the novel's language is offensive, "the literary value of the book outweighed the negative aspect of the language employed."

The Gilberts will appeal to Superintendent Debra Bowers.

As word of the challenge to the book spread at school, some students created posters saying "Save Huck Finn" and began a Web site objecting to the Gilberts' request.

Patrick Zahner, a junior, read the book last year after previously reading Twain's "Tom Sawyer." He described the request to remove "Huckleberry Finn" as "misguided" because Twain uses racist characters "to parody racism." Similar arguments could be used "to take many other books out of the curriculum," he said.

Rosalyn Korst, head of the high school's language arts department, said that in her 34 years at St. Louis Park she could not recall a previous effort to remove a title from the curriculum. Some parents have asked that their children be allowed to read alternative books.

Korst said the Twain book's value in the curriculum rests partly on "learning to fight racism in a safe environment....It's a good learning experience."

She said Twain's uses of dialects, satire and irony are important teaching tools and illustrate why he is considered "the authentic voice of the American people."

Korst said the book was read this year by more than 100 students in four sections of the 10th-grade honors program. It also is read by 11th-grade English students and is part of the required reading list of the International Baccalaureate program.
Laney said students may request an alternative assignment. Nia Gilbert and another student read "The Secret Life of Bees" by Sue Monk Kidd as an alternative to "Huckleberry Finn."

But Gilbert said such a request can make a student feel ostracized from the rest of the class. He said his daughter has taken heat at school because of the controversy. Nia Gilbert declined to be interviewed.

Gilbert said he "wholeheartedly" disagrees with the school committee's recommendation and that if his appeal to Bowers fails he will suggest that his daughter leave the St. Louis Park school system. He predicted that because she knows he wants what's best for her, "She will accept my recommendation."

The Gilberts' objections echo those over many generations since Twain's book was published in 1885. Twain's novel was the fifth most-challenged book during the 1990s, according to a list published by the American Library Association. It has slipped from that rank since then.

Other books occasionally have stirred controversies in Minnesota schools. In 1997, the Sauk Rapids-Rice school board voted to keep John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" in its curriculum despite a parent's complaint that it was racist.

Audrey Betcher, past president of the Minnesota Library Association and library director in Rochester, said, "The really important point is that just because (a book) is controversial doesn't mean it's bad." Presented in the proper historical context, it can "teach critical-thinking skills," she said.


**READING RESPONSE:** *Should controversial books be banned from schools and school libraries? Explain.*