



By the Book

BRIEF-CASE

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The Centerville Public Schools serve a middle-class district about twenty miles from the nearest major city. As part of their Portrait of a Graduate, approved by the Board of Education, the district strives to educate students to become “thoughtful, ethical, and engaged civic leaders.” However, at Centerville High School, some faculty members have expressed concern about political partisanship at the school. While the metropolitan region is politically diverse, with about equal percentages of Republicans and Democrats and a majority identifying as “Independent,” both Centerville and the student population at CHS lean Democratic. Perhaps as a result, conservative students rarely speak up in class discussions about controversial or political topics.

Mr. Jackson, the head of the English department, is particularly troubled by political polarization he sees on campus; many students are demonizing not only Trump but also Trump voters, despite teachers’ best efforts to create classrooms that welcome diverse viewpoints. So Mr. Jackson proposes building on the existing mission of the school and of the English department, which strives to provide both windows and mirrors through literature, by making J.D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* required summer reading for all incoming ninth graders.

Pushback to his suggestion is swift. Within the department, some teachers argue that the district’s values preclude them from giving a platform to authors who espouse racist, xenophobic, and other hateful views. One teacher also points out that many writers from that part of the country have critiqued the book for reinforcing stereotypes about “backwardness” in Appalachia.

However, other teachers point out that while Vance espouses hateful views now, they don’t form a significant part of his memoir. Furthermore, they argue, including the book brings in a conservative author through a text that helps build empathy for people who are economically and culturally removed from the students.

Word of the suggestion leaks out, and the controversy increases. A group of students joins together to create a petition demanding that the book be removed from consideration; it has been signed by about a quarter of the student body. Meanwhile, conservative students are speaking to guidance counselors, English teachers, and other faculty to say they already feel like outsiders on campus and this latest suggestion that conservative voices have no place at the school deepens their feelings of isolation.

Parents have also weighed in to the school principal, Dr. Hall, and the superintendent. While some have voiced their anger that the district is even considering Vance’s book as required summer reading, others are angered by the pushback. After all, Vance is the country’s vice president; why shouldn’t his book have a place in the curriculum? Doesn’t one of the senior electives read *Dreams from My Father*, by Barack Obama?

Mr. Jackson is unsure whether to proceed with his plan, but he needs to place orders for summer reading in the next week in order to distribute books on time. While text selections are generally made at the department level, Mr. Jackson turns to Dr. Hall for advice, knowing that she’ll have to deal with the community response. She in turn calls the superintendent, who has already been fielding community feedback. They know that some community members will be unhappy no matter what they choose and agree to make the decision together. Should they make *Hillbilly Elegy* required summer reading for ninth grade?

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