



October 8, 2024

Dear Chappaqua Schools Superintendent Ackerman:

PEN America is a nonprofit organization standing at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect open expression in the United States and worldwide. For the past three years, we have been [documenting](#) the surge in efforts to restrict access to books in schools across the country. As advocates for the freedom to read, we are writing to urge you to **return *Young Palestinians Speak* by Annemarie Young and Anthony Robinson to your middle school libraries.**

As we understand it, *Young Palestinians Speak* was available in a middle school library last school year, but became the subject of controversy when it was included in a library display in April for Arab American Heritage Month. After a complaint from a community member, the title was not only removed from the display, but also prohibited from being accessed by students while it was under review. A decision was later made to remove the book from the middle school library entirely, restricting it solely to the Horace Greeley High School library.

These choices have had the regrettable effect of diminishing access to this title for middle school students in the district, the precise students for whom the book is recommended (grades 4-6). Access to diverse stories and representative literature makes a difference in the lives of all students, and it is especially concerning that this choice was made during Arab American Heritage Month, an opportune time for Palestinian voices to be heard, not censored.

In PEN America's [definition](#), a school book ban occurs when an objection to the content of a book leads to that volume being withdrawn either fully or partially from availability. Book bans can be both permanent and temporary. When titles are aged up to older grades as a result of these complaint processes, they are no longer available to the intended readers and those most likely to engage with the content. We identify this as *banned by restriction*.

PEN America understands the tremendous pressure that has been placed on school districts across the country to scrutinize their library collections. But this pressure does not relieve districts of their responsibility to follow neutral, established processes when such complaints arise. Review policies must be followed, and processes should be clear and transparent. We also advocate that access to books not be suspended while review processes are underway, precisely because doing so deprives students of their freedom to read, and can give a single objector or small minority the ability to control access to books for all for an indeterminate period of time. The purpose of a school library is to inform, to facilitate voluntary inquiry, and to support learning and literacy for all.

We are encouraged that the Chappaqua Central School District [includes](#) within its policies the American Library Association's School Library Bill of Rights, [and that](#) "students have a right to

... free inquiry and expression provided the rights of others are not diminished." PEN America supports these rights.

Children's literature expert Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop once [said](#): "Literature transforms the human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience." Literature can open doors, hearts, and minds, helping young people to gain empathy and insight into those different from them. Forms of suppression and the censorship of ideas at the behest of some ideologies or viewpoints threatens the freedom to read, and puts students' opportunity to learn about difference in jeopardy.

For these reasons, we urge you to review and revise your actions regarding *Young Palestinians Speak*. This will protect and respect the rights of all students and parents in your community, and support your district's library professionals who facilitate students' freedom to read and learn every day.

Our team would be pleased to speak with you further about this matter. Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,



Kasey Meehan  
Freedom to Read Program Director

*On behalf of the Freedom to Read Program at PEN America*