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Dear parents, students, and educators,

The banning of books is becoming an increasingly prevalent issue in our society, especially considering the intense political divisions that are currently impacting our country. While I understand the desire to protect children from subjects that may cause them to be uncomfortable or disturbed, it is important to remember that banning books as a means to keep our children “safe” can have adverse effects, leaving students less educated on the important realities of the world around them.

One example of this can be seen in the public response surrounding *Maus*, a graphic novel written and illustrated by Art Spiegelman. *Maus* follows Art as he interviews his father Vladek about his experiences and memories as a Holocaust survivor. The story is told non-chronologically, flashing back and forth between Vladek’s harrowing past and the present, where Art and Vladek discuss these moments together. One of the most notable traits of *Maus*, however, is that rather than portraying its characters as people, it uses animals to metaphorically represent the different groups of people who were impacted by the Holocaust.

Due to the intense and heartbreaking nature of the book’s subject matter, it is understandable why some people are initially hesitant to expose children to this content. However, many of the bannings of this book are based on matters that are relatively miniscule. According to The New York Times, a Tennessee school board decided to ban this book from being taught in their schools just months ago, in January of 2022. When asked why the novel was not suitable for students, the McMinn County Board of Education responded by saying that the novel was banned due to its “unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide.” While this evaluation of *Maus*’ content is technically correct, it is incredibly important to also evaluate the context of these subjects within the novel. Firstly, on the matter of inappropriate language, *Maus* is rather limited in its use of profanity. The entire novel contains only eight cuss words, and while it does include some derogatory terms used against particular ethnic groups, this language could be deemed as manageable due to the period in

which the majority of the novel is set. The book does also include some nudity, such as drawings of nude prisoners, most notably displayed on page 186, which shows a rather undetailed drawing of multiple naked characters within a large shared shower. However, it is important to note that these characters are portrayed as mice, which makes this nudity significantly less inappropriate for a young audience. In fact, the only instance of nudity from a human character is a small drawing of female breasts on page 102. While the novel does include a few frames of slight nudity, it is important to understand not only that these instances are brief and significantly less detailed than other sketches in the book, but that none of the nudity is used in a sexual way. In fact, these moments of nudity are not only completely unerotic, but are completely heartbreaking, as they display the dehumanization that comes with experiencing violence and mistreatment. The depiction of nude female breasts, for example, is far from sexual, being used to display Art's mother being found dead in her bathtub after she committed suicide.

This sequence of the book was, of course, also commented on due to its representation of someone taking their own life. However, this passage is far from descriptive or graphic, only briefly touching on the subject of suicide. While it is normal to want to protect children from content such as profanity, nudity, and self-harm, it is important to acknowledge what a small portion of the novel this content occupies, and to understand the importance of the rest of the book's subjects.

The main goal of *Maus* is to present an accurate depiction of one survivor's experiences of the Holocaust. Because the novel does center around genocide and ethnic cleansing, it is understandable why people have concerns about the violent and disturbing content that might be displayed. Spiegelman himself is aware of this. He spoke about his work on *Maus* during a 2022 webinar: "This is disturbing imagery. But you know what? It's disturbing history." While some people still have their hesitations about sharing *Maus* with students, I believe that the most important thing to remember is that this is a true story. The Holocaust was a real event that claimed millions of lives and will forever mark one of the darkest times in the history of our world. Events such as this will never be easy to talk about, and will always come with discomfort, pain, and grief. But to stop talking about these events will not change the fact that they happened. In fact, it is extremely important to overcome our discomfort and continue to teach about this topic, because keeping people informed can be one of the most integral preventative measures to make sure that we can completely stop genocides. Within Vladek's

story itself we can see what happens when everyone collectively decides to ignore the warning signs and assume that the worst couldn't possibly happen. Having this documentation of history reminds us that it can happen, and that we need to stay aware of the steps in order to stop it. The U.S. Holocaust Museum addressed this in a series of tweets following the bans in Tennessee: "Maus has played a vital role in educating about the Holocaust through sharing detailed and personal experiences of victims and survivors... Teaching about the Holocaust using books like Maus can inspire students to think critically about the past and their own roles and responsibilities today." This is so incredibly important now more than ever, as we are unfortunately living in a time when antisemitism has become increasingly prevalent, as reported by NPR: "According to the Anti-Defamation League, 2021 was the highest year on record for documented reports of harassment, vandalism and violence directed against Jews... These record breaking numbers present as part of a consistent, five year upswing in the number of antisemitic incidents, unprecedented in the ADL's three plus decades of data collection." In today's modern world of social media, young children are being taught hateful and bigoted rhetoric by celebrities, news outlets, and strangers. By preventing students from reading about the real effects of racism and antisemitism, we are feeding into a society that sits back silently and allows these mistreatments to continue.

Overall, I firmly believe that *Maus* is not only incredibly undeserving of these recent bans, but is an extremely important piece of reading. With that being said, *Maus* is a difficult book. It covers hard and triggering topics. It forces readers to face grim realities that are often easier to ignore. But *Maus* is not simply the story of the Holocaust. It is a story of perseverance, family, memory, and love. It gives its readers hope that while there is evil, we have the ability to be the good. To remove the story of the Holocaust from our classrooms will not change the past. It will not bring back the millions of lives that were lost due to hatred. But it does have the power to change the future, which is why we must defend *Maus*, and other banned or challenged books, from these unjustifiable removals.

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