

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

Curious about ‘George’

Just when you think you’ve seen it all, you read about a school district discouraging children from reading books.

That’s what the Hermiston School District decided last week: Rather than reckon with the chapter book “George,” told from the perspective of a transgender character, the district instead chose to pull all of its students out of the statewide Battle of the Books competition and re-read past titles instead.

The competition, which provides an incentive to encourage students to read quality literature, has been wildly popular in Hermiston in past years.

But not in the 2018-2019, when third- through fifth-grade students have been herded away from children’s books like “Pip Barlett’s Guide to Magical Creatures,” “Waylon! One Awesome Thing” and, yes, “George,” written by Alex Gino.

It’s a bad decision on the face of it — discouraging students from an

academic pursuit is something that would reflect poorly on any educational institution. But the way that the Hermiston School District announced its decision inflicted additional harm.

The district sent out a vague letter, noting only that it would not participate in the competition because the book “George” was incompatible with the district’s curriculum. They could have been more clear and open about the issue and how they came to their decision. They could have empowered students and parents at the same time. They could have said, “Here’s this book ‘George,’ here’s what it’s about, here’s how you can check it out of the library. Read it yourself, because we’re not sure all parents of third-graders would want their child to do so. We want you to know what it’s about.”

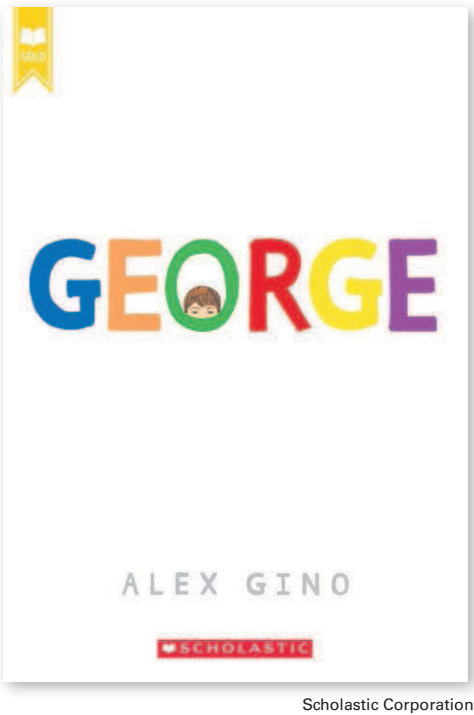
Likely many parents would have taken them up on the offer, and some of those will have found the book harmless and let their child read away and take part in the competition. Others

would have made the opposite choice and waited to address the topic in their own way.

But since the reasoning was unclear, the transgender elementary students in the Hermiston School District will get the worst of it. The message they likely received from school administration: Your story is too different. We’re not ready to hear from you. We’re not ready to deal with you. We’re not ready for your students and classmates to consider your struggles.

One of the blurbs touting the book says: “Readers going through a similar experience will feel that they are no longer alone, and cisgender readers may gain understanding and empathy.”

That’s the goal of any good book. And scientists the world over have proven that fiction is a remarkable tool for promoting knowledge, understanding and empathy. Books can help, but only if you read them. Libraries and schools should promote them, not avoid them.



Scholastic Corporation

“George” by Alex Gino is the story of a transgender boy and part of the Oregon Battle of the Books curriculum for 2018-19. The Hermiston School District opted to not participate in the statewide competition because of the subject matter.

We encourage all students and parents to read as many books as you can this year, including “George.” You’ll be better for it, and so will your school.

OTHER VIEWS

He changed the world, twice

This column is about a man who changed the world, at least twice. I want to focus less on the impact of his work, which is all around us, and more on how he did it, because he’s a model of how you do social change.

Stewart Brand was born in Rockford, Illinois, in 1938, the son of an advertising executive. By the early 1960s, he felt alienated from boring, bourgeois suburbia and concluded that Native Americans had a lot to teach the rest of us about how to lead a more authentic way of life.

In 1965, he created a multimedia presentation called “America Needs Indians,” which he performed at the LSD-laced, proto-hippie gatherings he helped organize in California.

Brand then had two epiphanies. First, there were no public photos of the entire earth. Second, if people like him were going to return to the land and lead natural lives, they would need tools.

He lobbied NASA to release a photograph of the whole earth, which became an iconic image for the environmental movement. Then he slapped the picture on the cover of what he called the “Whole Earth Catalog.”

The catalog was an encyclopedia of useful items for people heading to a commune — home weaving kits, potter’s wheels, outdoor gear. But it was also a bible for what would come to be known as the counterculture, full of reading lists and rich with the ideas of Buckminster Fuller and others.

“Whole Earth Catalog” sold 2.5 million copies, won the National Book Award and defined an era.

When a culture changes, it’s often because a small group of people on society’s margins find a better way to live, parts of which the mainstream adopts. Brand found a magic circle in the Bay Area counterculture. He celebrated it, publicized it, gave it a coherence it otherwise lacked and encouraged millions to join.

The catalog featured an iconic central character, the Cowboy Nomad, who served as symbol and role model. Brand took influences from different parts of America — the New York art world, farmers, academic visionaries like Marshal McLuhan — and synthesized them into one ethos. He crowdsourced later editions, asking readers to recommend other cool products to feature.

The communes fizzled. But on the other side of the Bay Area, Brand sensed another cultural wave building. Back in the 1960s, computers seemed like the ultimate establishment device — IBM and the government used them to reduce people to punch cards.

But Brand and others imagined them launching a consciousness revolution — personal tools to build neural communities that would blow the minds of mainstream America. As Fred Turner says in “From



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

Counterculture to Cyberculture,” “What the communes failed to accomplish, the computers would complete.”

Brand played cultural craftsman once again, this time first as a celebratory journalist. In 1972 he wrote a piece for Rolling Stone announcing the emergence of a new outlaw hacker culture. The hackers were another magic circle on the cutting edge of the future, a circle

Brand would publicize and inspire others to join.

As my *Times* colleague John Markoff, who is writing a biography of Brand, notes, Brand is a talented community architect. In the 1970s, he was meshing Menlo Park computer geeks with cool hippie types. The tech people were entranced by “Whole Earth,” including Steve Jobs and Frederick Moore, co-creator of the celebrated Homebrew Computer Club.

Brand meshed the engineers with the Merry Pranksters and helped give tech a moral ethos, a group identity, a sense of itself as a transformational force for good.

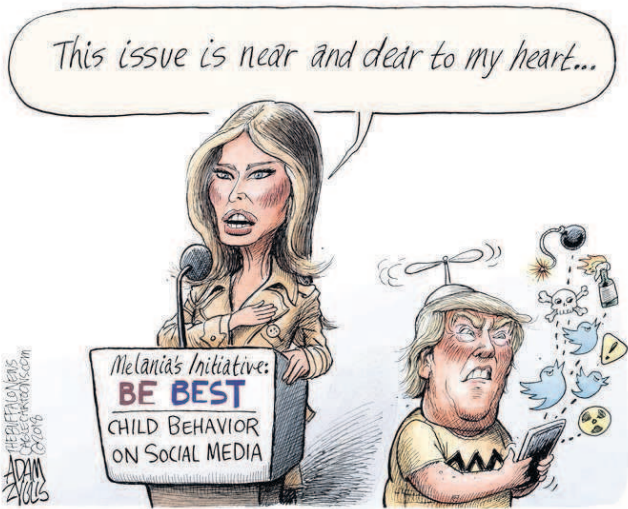
In 1985, Brand and Larry Brilliant helped create the Well, an early online platform (like Usenet) where techies could meet and share. He helped Kevin Kelly organize hacker conferences, which attracted media attention. As Silicon Valley became more corporate in the 1980s and 1990s, he also helped form the Learning Conferences, Worldview Meetings, the Global Business Net and other convenings that gathered the multidisciplinary theorists and journalists who would define the wired culture: Kelly, Esther Dyson, Tim Berners-Lee and Nicholas Negroponte.

Brand’s gift, Frank Foer writes in “World Without Mind,” is “to channel the spiritual longings of his generation and then to explain how they could be fulfilled through technology.” Innovations don’t just proceed by science alone; as Foer continues, “the culture prods them into existence.”

Turner argues that Brand has always craved a sensation of wholeness, a feeling of belonging and authenticity. He has found communities that gave him that sensation and has encouraged millions to love what he has loved. He synthesized a cultural ethos, and then tried to embody and spread that ethos through festivals, conferences and organizations.

Brand vehemently disagrees with me, but I’d say that, more recently, the computer has also failed as a source of true community. Social media seems to immiserate people as much as it bonds them. And so there’s a need for future Brands, young cultural craftsmen who identify those who are building the future, synthesizing their work into a common ethos and bringing them together in a way that satisfies the eternal desire for community and wholeness.

David Brooks became a *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist in 2003.



YOUR VIEWS

Eastern Oregon schools offer wide-ranging opportunities

By SEN. ARNIE ROBLAN
AND REP. BARBARA SMITH WARNER
Co-chairs of the Joint Committee
on Student Success

In late April, the Oregon Legislature’s Joint Committee on Student Success continued its statewide tour with small group meetings and public hearings in Eastern Oregon.

We spent three days touring facilities and talking with students, parents, administrators, teachers, and community members in Baker City, Hermiston, Pendleton, Morrow County and Arlington.

We began each day hearing directly from students. One thing we learned from those meetings is that Eastern Oregon is home to some of the brightest, most energetic teenagers anywhere. During our three-day trip we saw how their schools are working hard to give them a fair shot at success.

We started our tour at Baker Technical Institute, a remarkable career and technical education facility. From their amazing culinary program, to health care training, to simulators that teach students how to operate heavy farming and construction equipment, BTI is helping build a workforce for the 21st century.

Just blocks away, we saw the Baker Web Academy and Early College. These virtual charter schools offer courses to students all across Oregon. Their programs allow students struggling in traditional classrooms to take a different approach to learning, earn their high school diploma and get a head start on college.

In Boardman, we saw how a focus on early childhood education can make a difference in graduation rates in the next decade. Here InterMountain Education Service District works with special needs children beginning just days after birth. Morrow County School District provides “wrap around” services to students and their families by providing a central contact point not just for education

services, but for a whole array of social services that help keep students healthy and in school.

In Pendleton, we toured the Tribal Attendance Pilot Program at Washington Elementary. The program is bringing Native American culture into the school to boost student attendance. This effort builds relationships between the school and tribes to address historical trauma and improve the educational experience for the next generation of Native students and their families.

In Hermiston we saw high-end homes being built, in part, with student labor. Working with local contractors, students build one home a year. In the process they learn skills that help them transition into the workforce.

Arlington schools provided a glimpse of the opportunities and challenges the state’s smallest districts face. We met administrators and teachers who double as coaches and counselors and bus drivers. We saw a remarkably high-tech CTE program where educators train diesel mechanics and graphic designers; where students build offroad sand rail dune buggies and use a 3-D printer.

While the geography that surrounds them is different, Eastern Oregon students are much like their peers everywhere. They need and want to look up to their teachers and connect with adults who care about them.

They want to have opportunities to participate in sports and music and art. They want to learn.

We want that for them, too. The Joint Committee on Student Success is invested in creating a plan that will give Eastern Oregon, and all schools in the state, the support they deserve to succeed and to provide that opportunity for every student.

■

Senator Arnie Roblan (D-Coos Bay) and Representative Barbara Smith Warner (D-Portland) are co-chairs of the Joint Committee on Student Success.

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