

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Anna Quindlen has extensive experience as a journalist and as an author of fiction and non-fiction prose. For several years she has been a columnist for Newsweek, publishing the following essay on July 21, 2008.

WRITE AND WRONG

Each year in the state of Indiana, librarians, teachers and students compile a list of 20 nominated books for the Eliot Rosewater Award, named after a character in the work of Kurt Vonnegut, a native of the state. This year one finalist was "The Freedom Writers Diary," which makes even more bizarre what happened to Connie Heermann, tossed from her classroom for trying to use that same book as a teaching tool.

In the months since Heermann was placed on an 18-month suspension without pay by the school board in Perry Township, her case has been ballyhooed as errant censorship. But it's really a cautionary tale about what's too often the ruling principle in American public education: the timidity and inefficiency of powerful bureaucracies far removed from the daily lives of either teachers or kids.

A bit about "The Freedom Writers Diary": the book grew out of the work of Erin Gruwell, who was once a newbie teacher in a class of at-risk students in California. "At risk" is edu-code: it most often means the students in question are poor, minority, have chaotic home lives, are likely to drop out. Gruwell decided that the road to success for her students was to get them to write their lives. They kept diaries about everything from self-doubt to incest to gang membership. Some of the students used profanity and racial slurs, but a reader notices that as their writing improves, that disappears. As Gruwell says, "As they wrote more, they made better choices." They also had better lives. The students in Gruwell's classes started out believing they might not survive high school—literally. By the end of the book, they're heading to college.

Which brings us back to Heermann, whose students at Perry Meridian High School were not much different from the ones in the diary and who she hoped would see their struggles—and their potential—within its pages. After attending a training session last summer with Gruwell, she came home psyched. She persuaded a local businessman to pay for 150 copies of "The Freedom Writers Diary," but her principal asked her to hold off using it until the central office could take a look. That's unusual—most teachers use materials other than approved textbooks in their classes, and Heermann had done so before—but she started the year with John Grisham's "The Street Lawyer" instead. A lawyer visited the classroom, and students wrote letters to the author. "My kids were loving it," Heermann says. "They were even reading ahead." The engagement that had led Gruwell's students to success in school was in full flower, and Heermann decided it was time for empowerment, and the diary.

Here are the bare facts of what happened next: Heermann sent out permission slips to parents, virtually all of whom signed them. She informed the central office that she would be distributing the books on Nov. 15, and did. Almost immediately she was told to collect the books, and to keep a list of the names of those who did not comply. Most of the kids refused to

hand over their copies. And before you could say "free exchange of ideas," Heermann was told that if she didn't resign, she would be fired.

Did I mention that she'd been teaching for 27 years, and that she paid for all those copies of the Grisham book herself?

It's hard to unearth exactly why someone was so hellbent on keeping "The Freedom Writers Diary" out of this classroom. Maybe it was the use of a particular racial slur, the one that keeps getting people riled about "Huckleberry Finn" and that provides the perfect teachable moment for discussing racial divisions in America—at least if you're not paralyzed by cowardice. You have to wonder whether the school-board members even read the book. Maybe they never made it to the entry by the student who said, "Who would have thought of the 'at risk' kids making it this far? But we did, even though the educational system desperately tried to hold us down." It's a they said/she said situation, difficult to parse because so much took place behind closed doors. The board lawyer said Heermann was told not to use the book and she did so anyhow. She says after months of silence from higher-ups, she assumed they just didn't care.

If the school board of Perry Township wanted to counter "The Freedom Writers Diary," it certainly did. The book teaches that open discussion about challenging subjects is always best, that engagement always trumps silence. The members of that board were outraged by alleged insubordination when they should have been outraged by the glacial pace of decision-making by their top administrators. Insubordination is what built this country, and a glacial pace in education means you lose kids.

Have I mentioned that it's hard to get really good people to become teachers?

Connie Heermann will be teaching three courses in the fall at a local community college. She'll be making less than \$5,000, but she's grateful for the opportunity. She was forbidden to contact her students after her job was yanked out from under her, was forced to go overnight from a powerful presence in their lives to a complete cipher. What made it worse was that she knows they are kids who assume they'll get the shaft. That's what "at risk" means, too. She hears that some stopped going to class. It looks as though her students are not going to wind up the way Erin Gruwell's did. That makes her so sad, but she doesn't regret what she did. "You know what?" she says. "My students have the book. They kept the book!" And then her voice breaks.

ESSAY TOPIC

Quindlen reports that the central theme of the The Freedom Writers Diary is "that open discussion about challenging subjects is always best, that engagement always trumps silence." Your task is not to assess the accuracy or validity of Quindlen's assertion. It is, rather, to assess how well a community important to you—your family, campus, city, state, country, for example—engages in "open discussion about challenging subjects." How do you account for the success (or lack of success) you perceive? Develop your answer through the use of specific examples, drawing from your personal experience, reading, and observations of others.