**Cherry Hill Controversy**

Cherry Hill, New Jersey, is a middle-class community across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. A suburb that was nearly all white in the early 1980s, 20 percent of its population is now African American, Latino, or Asian. Cherry Hill, like many communities, has had to grapple with issues of how to integrate different cultures, and how to raise consciousness about the perspectives of minorities in a place where, until recently, so-called minority issues were only something to read about in the newspaper.

In 1995, several African American high school students in Cherry Hill complained to their parents about having to read *Huck Finn* in class. Before assigning it, some teachers had not mentioned that the book was controversial, nor had they noted the more than two hundred instances of the word "nigger" in the novel. As a result, according to one of the students, no one was prepared for the power of the word in class. White students would nervously "snicker" or "turn around and stare" at the handful of African American students when the word was read aloud.

The African American students felt too ashamed to speak up or ask their teachers for help; instead, they simply stopped reading or attending class. Their parents, long frustrated with the lack of multicultural content in the district's curricula, initially tried to solve the problem by working with the school on a newly established Multicultural Task Force. As part of this effort, a team of experts in history and literature from nearby Villanova University, assembled by Professor Maghan Keita and including Professors Larry Little and Crystal Lucky, were invited to conduct a workshop on *Huck Finn* for the teachers at Cherry Hill. But by the end of the 1995-96 school year, the parents still felt that not enough had been done to correct the problem. If nothing more changed, one parent recalls, "we knew we'd have a firestorm on our hands."

In November 1996, a group of parents from the Cherry Hill Minority Civic Association (CHMCA) presented a formal "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" to the Board of Education, claiming that "the prejudicial effect of the racial characterizations outweigh any literary value that the book might have." The Board of Education, acting on its policy to respond within thirty days, established a committee to review the complaint, chaired by Richard Levy, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, and including administrators, teachers, and board members. One of the committee's most important recommendations, says Levy, was that all parties sit down for a "frank dialogue."

But on the night in 1996 when parents and teachers first came together, neither side believed they'd ever find common ground. "The group of us and the teachers sat across from each other, diametrically opposed, and there was so much tension you could cut it with a knife," remembers Pat McCargo, corresponding secretary of the CHMCA. Concerned about academic freedom, many teachers declared that they would never teach a book primarily as a "tool for political purposes" rather than as literature. If parents were allowed to dictate how to teach this book -- or whether or not to teach it at all -- the teachers asked, where would they draw the line? But as the parents rose to speak and told the teachers what their children hadn't been able to say in class -- that reading *Huck Finn* made them feel conspicuous and ashamed -- "we could actually see the teachers putting themselves in the kids' shoes," said one father. "What we found wasn't so much racism as misunderstanding," says Bill McCargo, president of the CHMCA. "At long last they finally understood."

For all the groups, the most important thing to come out of this meeting was an understanding that no one wanted to ban the book. "I got the feeling that people were saying instead, we want a solution," says teacher Sandy Forchion. "If we ban books, all we're doing is shoving the problem below the surface, and it's always going to be there," agrees Bill McCargo. There was also consensus that student learning was the first priority -- beyond the philosophical questions of censorship and intellectual freedom. As parent Danny Elmore commented at the time, "If [students] shut down we haven't done anything."

The process of negotiating a curriculum everyone could agree on took over a year, and during that time *Huck Finn* was taken out of the classroom. In the end, it was decided that not only would the curriculum be rewritten, but all Cherry Hill teachers wishing to teach the novel in the future would be required to attend a one-day workshop given by the Villanova professors. At the workshop and within the new curriculum, teachers would be given the historical, cultural, and literary resources to see the novel in a new light.

On the night the committee presented its final report to the Board of Education, television cameras came from stations all over southern New Jersey. "They were expecting a big fight," recalls Levy. "What they found instead was a solution to a very challenging problem."

While not all teachers in Cherry Hill have signed on for the workshop (and thus have chosen not to teach the book), most people feel that the new curriculum is both rich and balanced. Although it is only in its first year of classroom use and is, teachers emphasize, a work "in progress," the curriculum seems already to have changed how students see not just *Huck Finn,* but issues of race in general. "Racism was always part of the conversation [throughout the new curriculum]," says one eleventh grader, "[and] until this unit I didn't really realize how much racism continues today."

Everyone at Cherry Hill agrees that the controversy brought their community together. The strengthened relationship between the minority community and the schools is "one of the best things that came out of this," says the same parent who worried at first that there would be a "firestorm."

"When I look back at my career, this is right up at the top," says Levy. "We worked through the controversy and came to a resolution that's a win-win for everyone."

**Perspectives on Cherry Hill**

*Introduction*

  All four groups -- parents, teachers, administrators, and students -- agreed they were committed to finding a way to avoid banning the book. Each group also agreed that only one method really works in bringing different groups to consensus: "Keep talking, and keep bringing everyone together," as Richard Levy puts it. What is most striking about the Cherry Hill story is the degree of mutual understanding the various groups ultimately developed, as well as the warmth and respect with which the groups came to regard one another.

*Administration*

The most sensitive and important role administrators play is ensuring that the needs of all parties are addressed, balanced, and, as much as possible, met. For this reason, says Richard Levy, early on "we decided to have all parties come together to share their stories, issues, and concerns. We knew there could be a clash, but the community had to talk through this issue of banning." Although they strongly believed that no parent should be able to dictate the school's reading list, administrators were very concerned about how African American students felt in the classroom. They were also sympathetic to teachers, and well aware that some might perceive this challenge as being told what or how to teach. "Teachers will . . . be concerned about their intellectual freedom, about where the line is drawn," notes Lesley Solomon, Curriculum Coordinator.

In order to have the widest possible range of viewpoints, Levy expanded the committee convened to review the challenge from the mandated five people to seven so that more African Americans could be included. In the end, the committee, chaired by Levy, went through five drafts of the curriculum before they settled on the response presented to the Board of Education in December 1997..

*CHMCA*

The purpose of the CHMCA is to advocate for the minority community in Cherry Hill, especially for the children. The group had already had been concerned about how minorities were treated in Cherry Hill. So when a group of students, including Bill and Pat McCargo's daughter, objected to the way *Huck Finn* was taught in their eleventh grade class, the CHMCA felt something had to be done.

The CHMCA worried, however, that even after a formal complaint nothing substantial would happen. They decided that, if there was no compromise, "we had no recourse but to ask them to pull the book," remembers Pat McCargo. This decision sparked a heated internal debate between those who believed books should never be banned and those who saw banning as a viable last resort. Once the CHMCA met with the other groups, though, it quickly became obvious that banning *Huck Finn* wouldn't be necessary.

*Teachers*

  For many teachers, the key issue concerning challenged material is about academic freedom. Roland LaVoie is a teacher at the Cherry Hill East High School who, though he finds the new curriculum "brilliant" in the way it balances the concerns of all parties, has chosen not to attend the workshop (and thus not teach the book). "If we take away the English teacher's ability to apply judgment to a work of literature, we're just delivery machines . . . we might as well be on videotape," he explains.

Some of the teachers who eventually wrote and/or taught the new curriculum sympathize with this point of view, but Sandy Forchion, a Cherry Hill East High School English teacher and the co-writer of the new curriculum, says that, "For me it's hard to understand those teachers who don't want to change even after kids come to you and say they're hurt and want to stay out of class. How can you not find a way to address that?" Other teachers felt strongly enough about *Huck Finn* remaining in the high school curriculum to try the new curriculum. "I'd rather change my approach to a novel than lose the right to teach it," says Marge Kraemer, an English teacher at Cherry Hill West High School.

The challenge for the writers of the final curriculum, Sandy Forchion and Matthew Carr (also an English teacher at Cherry Hill East), was to balance the interests of all the groups while creating something that would remain true to the meaning of the novel. For Carr, it was important to discover that this challenge to *Huck Finn* was "not just some current, 'PC' thing" but an issue that had been raised continuously over the last forty years. Forchion's position was unique: "I was a black English teacher who was against censorship, but who had despised the way *Huck Finn* was taught to me when I was in school.

*Professors*

The main goal of the three Villanova University professors, says Crystal Lucky, Professor of African American Literature, was to empower the teachers. "There is a tendency for teachers to bypass what's going to be uncomfortable," she says. "The kids are going to talk about [these controversial subjects] outside class, and they'll [sense] a teacher's fear and uncertainty if he or she is not ready to teach something." But, as African American educators and as parents, "[we] also wanted the parents to feel someone listened to them," Lucky says.

*Students*

  Students helped shape the new curriculum by speaking out at the early meetings. Their role now is to help teachers evaluate the success of the curriculum as it is taught. Although some students complained that the controversy seemed overblown in the first place ("We don't get enough credit for understanding things-we could have read it without all of this"), many seemed to appreciate the richer context of the new curriculum. "This stuff [racism] is all over the news. We can't avoid it. . . . We already learn it outside of school, why not study it in school and get the real facts?" observed one student who had just finished reading *Huck Finn* with the new curriculum. Another student commented, "I think the impact of this book is in the discomfort the readers feel. . . . *Huck Finn* is perfect to read if it's taught correctly."