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South Bay School Board Tackles `Huck' Debate

by Jamie Beckett, Chronicle South Bay Bureau

More than 80 people packed an East San Jose school board meeting for a long-awaited vote on whether the classic American novel ``The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'' will remain on required reading lists.

After nearly three hours of often emotional public testimony, the board of trustees of the East San Jose High School District was still debating late last night whether to grant a request from a group of African American parents who want the Mark Twain novel either removed from a reading list in 11 high schools or replaced with an version that omits offensive language.

Much of the testimony consisted of passionate declarations from African American parents and others on how the word ``nigger,'' which appears more than 200 times in the novel, affects them.

``For me, each sound of the word `nigger' rings out like the sound of rifle fire, as the bullet tears through the face of Dr. (Martin Luther) King,'' said Chester Stevens, a founder of the African-American Parent Coalition.

The coalition argues that the book erodes their children's self-esteem and affects their school performance, because it includes racial epithets and negative stereotypes.

But others, including several students, said the book serves a valuable purpose.

``We can't shelter everybody from everything. We have to realize how cruel people really are,'' said Christine Cortinas, a junior at Andrew Hill High School in East San Jose.

School officials have said they chose ``Huckleberry Finn'' for the list because it is considered by many critics to be the beginning of an American literary tradition. In addition, they cited Mark Twain's masterful use of satire and the novel's potential as a starting point for discussing racism.

The book is one of seven on a list from which two are selected, usually by teachers. The required list and an optional reading list encompass a diverse group of authors and novels, including Amy Tan's ``The Joy Luck Club,'' Richard Wright's ``Black Boy,'' Isabel Allende's ``House of the Spirits,'' and Harper Lee's ``To Kill a Mockingbird.''

A panel of parents, teachers, students and administrators urged trustees last week to keep ``Huckleberry Finn'' on the reading list. Acknowledging that ``some students may be adversely affected'' by the book, the committee said teachers should be trained to teach the novel sensitively.

``Huckleberry Finn'' is the second textbook challenge by the African-American Parent Coalition. Earlier, the group persuaded school officials to move the novel ``The Cay'' from required to optional reading lists in middle schools in San Jose's Oak Grove School District.

The American Civil Liberties Union called any proposal to limit access to ``Huckleberry Finn'' or other novels on the reading list ``fundamentally misguided.'' In a letter to school board President Manuel Herrera, the ACLU said that allowing outside groups to intervene in school curricula encourages ``a tug-of-war among ideological opponents.''

``Huckleberry Finn,'' which tells of the adventures of young Huck and the runaway slave Jim as they make their way down the Mississippi River, has been controversial since it was published in 1885. It is among the most frequently challenged books in schools, according to People for the American Way, which has been tracking attempts to ban books since 1982.

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