

Letter In Support of Karen Salazar

June 15, 2008

Teachers at any level--elementary, high school, or college--who can engage and inspire their students are an invaluable resource in a democratic society. They should be nurtured, mentored, and supported--not cast out.

Instructors should be left free to use those materials in their classrooms that help them to engage their students in critical thinking, the open discussion of ideas, and democratic participation. The materials Ms. Salazar uses seem to be achieving these important goals. How much "multicultural material" is too much? For years in this country our educational curriculum was "mono-cultural"; no one fired the teachers who taught that curriculum. Ms. Salazar should not lose her position for attempting to give her students what they believe and she believes that they need.

Firing teachers for what they say in the classroom smacks of censorship and is an assault on intellectual freedom. Wise administrators would use this opportunity to energize their entire school system by starting a serious discussion of their curriculum and educational goals. Ms. Salazar should be commended for raising questions about an educational system that is not serving most of our young people particularly well. Rather than "killing the messenger," administrators at Jordan High School should be listening carefully to her message.

I have been teaching poems by Langston Hughes and The Autobiography of Malcolm X for over twenty-five years here at Occidental College. Including these materials in my courses has broadened the perspective of my students and, I like to believe, helped to prepare them to live their lives in an increasingly diverse democratic society.

Eric Newhall
Professor, Occidental College
American Studies/English and Comparative Literary Studies