



## An Open Letter to the Library Community

June 11, 2014

Dear Colleagues:

Many people have questioned why BCALA, Inc., an organization that strongly opposed the showing of the film entitled *The Speaker* in 1977, has now endorsed it as an educational program for the ALA Annual Conference in June 2014, 37 years later. I received several emails asking, *when will BCALA issue a statement?*

The BCALA Executive Board voted to support this program from the perspective of supporting freedom of speech and to show a historic perspective on this situation. *The Speaker* film isn't the first, or last, racially charged literature that will cause us pause. I often reflect on the 1994 release of *The Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. We had heated debates in my graduate program and one faculty member said to me, *"You must read the book to understand the foundation in which the author declares his theory. You cannot respond to this issue from a purely emotional place. Reading the work better prepares and propositions you to dismantle the theory."* Had I not read the text, I wouldn't have been able to disregard it intellectually – and emotionally.

As our governance structure permits, a proposal was submitted to the Executive Board requesting that BCALA collaborate on this project. The conversation began with those members who were present during the first iteration of this issue. The Executive Board debated the pros and the cons, talked about the historical decision regarding this film in the past, and questioned why we should collaborate in this venture. One member clearly reflected that this film, and the possible showing of it in the past, sent a blowing ripple through ALA at the time. In order to truly understand the history behind this, you must remember, this was in 1977. Times have changed and the BCALA Executive Board felt it was time for us to discuss this political hot button.

We felt it was time to speak truth about our past and to allow our colleagues, whom many fight for the freedom of speech, to share their thoughts and feelings about this film without banning, blocking, or attempting to halt this educational moment. As an educator, I couldn't resist asking students their opinions of the film. I questioned five students and two agreed that while they value free speech, they agreed with the decision to not show the film. One did not see this as a race issue, but merely a freedom of speech issue. Another student felt he wanted to hear the speaker so he could understand the perspective *"of a racist."* The last student, Mr. Harris stated:

*"I have watched the entire video and I must say that I adore the Current Event Committee Adviser, Ms. Victoria, for not intruding on the students' decision to allow the speaker to speak. I believe that the students on committee and the entire student body would have learned something about themselves, others, and the world from the speaker's speech. I was born and raised in Mississippi and it is no secret*

*that racism is deeply rooted there. Being more exposed to racism...I am knowledgeable of it, unfortunately from experience. Most people only hear about racism...but racism is not dead. Being exposed to racism is no different from tasting an unfamiliar food for the first time. You do not know if it will taste sweet, sour, salty, or if you are allergic to it, but that experience teaches you something unique."*

Lastly, times have changed. The America my grandparents experienced is not the America I experience, and in 37 years, it will not be the America we know today. In 1977, Civil Rights legislation was merely 13 years old, compared to 50 years today. It is safe to say that at the age of 50, one would not think as you did at 13. Our Country is rich in positive experiences and has grown tremendously in the area of race relations and intellectual freedom.

Thank you to those who have asked the question, *why is BCALA supporting this film?* I offer you our answer: It is time to talk! We invite you to join us and discuss the issue. Let's work together to make a positive change so the next generation isn't afraid to look at historical moments/challenges such as this and shy away from discussing something their grandparents couldn't.

President Jerome Offord, Jr.  
BCALA