

Thank you for reaching out and for the opportunity to provide additional context.

As educators, we have the dual responsibilities of presenting our students with a rich and challenging education, using a myriad of instructional texts, and as well to protect and support their well-being, including mental health. Unfortunately we are in a moment in our community where we are experiencing a rash of mental health struggles both locally and across the nation, incidents of self-harm, and two recent tragic deaths.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a powerful and complex novel, but its themes of loneliness, despair, and tragic death gave us pause in this difficult moment. Timing matters: what is pedagogically rich in one moment can be emotionally harmful in another.

The decision was made to pause the use of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* this academic year only, NOT to remove it from the curriculum going forward. This decision was not taken lightly. This cohort of students has experienced the tragic loss of two peers in our community within the last month, preceded by another loss while these particular students were freshmen and finally another loss while this cohort of students were in middle school. Given that the novel contains significant themes related to violent death, self-harm, and depression, it was determined that temporarily removing the text was the most responsible and supportive choice for our students at this time. Our top priority at this moment is student well-being. While we firmly believe in the literary and educational value of the novel, we felt that introducing or continuing a text with such heavy themes so soon after these events could be emotionally difficult for members of our school community.

This decision does not diminish the rigor of the AP Literature course. We have every confidence in the abilities and training of our staff to provide flexibility in this moment and still maintain a rigorous instructional setting and robust curriculum to ready students for an AP exam. An alternate text, *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov, is being used in place of this novel that teaches the same analytical, interpretive, and writing skills required by the AP Literature curriculum, ensuring that students continue to receive a comprehensive and challenging academic experience. It is important to note that the South Orange Maplewood School District has a history of including widely discussed and, at times, challenged texts as part of its curriculum. *Lolita* is a novel that has frequently appeared in conversations about banned or contested books.

Our district strongly supports students' intellectual freedom, in line with the New Jersey Freedom to Read Act, and this book remains available in our library. The intent is to bring *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* back next year, when there has been adequate time for healing and reflection. This decision was not about censorship, but about exercising care and sensitivity during an especially vulnerable period for students

and staff. College Boards did not require this specific text to be read, and there are other texts for a teacher to choose from in our Board approved curriculum.

We value the passion students bring to discussions about curriculum and academic integrity, and we appreciate the concerns that have been raised. At the same time, we believe this temporary adjustment demonstrates our commitment to supporting students holistically while continuing to uphold rigorous academic standards. It is important that each classroom is always focused, not only on academic rigor and growth, but also the social and emotional well-being of each student.

Columbia High School offers a wide range of social-emotional and mental health supports, including counseling sessions facilitated by our team of school counselors, student assistance coordinator, social workers, and social work interns. Higher levels of care are also provided through Effective School Solutions (ESS). Additionally, Columbia High School partners with the Loft to offer both individual and family counseling. Most recently, the district launched STOPiT, an anonymous two way reporting system for students, staff, and families to report safety concerns. Students in need of support should contact a counselor, social worker, case manager or trusted adult.

#### Summary of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The novel follows Oscar de León, a Dominican American teenager growing up in New Jersey who loves science fiction and fantasy but feels deeply alienated because he is overweight, socially awkward, and unsuccessful in love. Oscar longs for connection and romance, believing they will give his life meaning.

The story is narrated mostly by Yunior, Oscar's college roommate, and is interwoven with the history of Oscar's family—especially his mother, Beli, and sister, Lola—against the backdrop of the Dominican Republic under the Trujillo dictatorship. A central concept in the novel is *fukú*, a generational curse tied to violence, oppression, and trauma that haunts Oscar's family.

Oscar's life is marked by rejection, depression, and an obsession with love. Eventually, he travels to the Dominican Republic, falls in love, and is brutally killed after refusing to give up that relationship. The novel explores themes of identity, masculinity, colonial trauma, loneliness, love, and inherited suffering, using dark humor, footnotes, and pop-culture references.

Using this novel two weeks after the death of a student in the school community would raise serious ethical and pedagogical concerns:

1. Duty of care outweighs curricular goals.

Even if the novel is AP-appropriate in skill level, educators have a responsibility to prioritize:

- Student well-being
- Healing-centered and trauma-informed teaching practices
- A classroom environment that feels emotionally safe

The duty may be violated not only by the commission of acts but also in the neglect or failure to act. The theory behind the duty is that the relationship between the child and school authorities is not a voluntary one but is compelled by law. The child must attend school and is subject to school rules and discipline. In turn, the school authorities are obligated to take reasonable precautions for his/her safety and well-being. The school personnel are accountable for injuries resulting from failure to discharge that duty.

## 2. Intense focus on despair and fatalism

Oscar is portrayed as chronically lonely, depressed, and convinced his life lacks value without romantic love. His arc can feel inescapable and fatalistic, which may be destabilizing for students who are grieving or vulnerable.

## 3. Risk of emotional triggering

The novel includes:

- Persistent hopelessness
- Social isolation and rejection
- A violent, early death of a young person

For students processing a recent loss, this material could bring up grief, anxiety, or unhealthy thoughts.

## 4. Romanticization risk

Oscar's death is sometimes interpreted as giving his life "meaning" through love and sacrifice. In a fragile context, students might misread this as:

- Suffering being noble
- Death as a form of validation or escape

That ambiguity is dangerous shortly after a real-life tragedy. Trauma impacts the brain in multiple ways, and temporarily shuts down higher-order thinking. The pre-frontal cortex is impaired when trauma occurs and can become underactive. (Retrieved from [National Library of Medicine](#).)

##### 5. Insufficient emotional distance

AP English often emphasizes critical analysis, but two weeks is not enough time for emotional processing. Students may not be ready to engage academically with material that mirrors feelings of despair, worthlessness, or loss.

All of these reasons are what influenced our decision making of temporarily removing the text this year. The students are reading within a specific time and context, and now is not the ideal time for this book, it would be like ignoring an open wound. We want to ensure that our students have time to process and heal before reading a book that could potentially add to recent trauma. As always, we are guided by our first and most important priority, the safety and well-being of all of our students.

South Orange Maplewood School District