



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“IRA was founded in 1956 as a professional organization for those involved in teaching reading to learners of all ages. Our members are dedicated to promoting high levels of literacy for all.”

-From the International Reading Association (IRA) website, ira.org

In the last week I have received four separate emails about Patricia Polacco’s cancelled appearance at the latest IRA conference. Polacco, as you may remember from a previous column, is the author of many wonderful children’s picture books, including one of my favorites, *Pink and Say*. She is also an outspoken and adamant opponent of No Child Left Behind, and it was that opposition that led to the recent events.

On her website is an open letter addressed to “All Educators, Librarians, and Media Specialists Regarding the cancellation of my appearance at the IRA in Chicago for May 2 and 3, 2006.” The letter then goes on to explain the situation and how it came about.

It started when Polacco was approached by The Buchanan Associates in Dublin, Ohio, and invited to participate in five events at IRA. Unaware they were speaking for SRA/McGraw Hill, she accepted, and

she says in her letter “It is always such an honor for me to speak and interact with teachers and librarians from around the country.” However, she began to receive telephone calls and emails regarding the content of her speech and eventually she realized the questions were regarding her “deep concern about the No Child Left Behind Mandate...as well as [her] concern that there is a link between this mandate and the SRA/McGraw Hill Company who manufactures, prints and profits from the sale of these tests to school systems all over the country...”

Polacco was asked to give a speech that was “upbeat, non-controversial, and non-political” and she responded by saying that “the plight of the American teacher is far from ‘upbeat’ and they are caught in the vice grip of the most controversial and political LIE that has ever been perpetrated on the American teacher.” She went on to say that if they had a

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problem with her refusal to rewrite her speech, they should rescind their invitation – and ultimately this is what they did.

The New York Times covered this issue in a May 13, 2006 piece by Susan Saulny called “Critic of No Child Left Behind Was Disinvited From Meeting.” This thorough article gives additional information about the original agreement Polacco had with McGraw-Hill, including the two agreed-upon topics for her speeches – neither of which specifically included No Child Left Behind. And yet, in Polacco’s opinion, they did – because they asked her to address the idea that teachers are heroes and need encouragement. To Polacco’s mind, this kind of acknowledgment must include the challenge of adhering to a policy that has what she calls a “negative impact” on education.

After hearing about this situation, I am awed by Polac-

co’s determination and dedication. Here is a children’s author who could write her books, give cheery talks to librarians and teachers, and consider that enough. Instead, she has taken her fame and used it to speak out against a policy she adamantly opposes. Her passion is a lesson to all of us, particularly our children, and her words and actions are heroic. It is not easy to speak one’s mind, especially when success in your chosen profession is dependent on the opinions of others.

In fact, there may be people who will be put off by these strongly expressed views and who will therefore not buy her books or check them out of the library. On the other hand, there will be teachers and librarians – like me – who will be proud to suggest a book that carries the name Patricia Polacco.