

Pornography and censorship: Controversial books returned to Utah school libraries' shelves

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School officials from the Canyons School District changed their book review and selection policy and returned nine titles they removed from the shelves a few months ago. These books were first removed after Utah parents asked school officials in various emails and letters to censor the books because they contained pornographic material.

Canyons School District school officials returned nine titles to bookshelves after removing them last November because of Utah parents denouncing their pornographic and obscene content. Utah parents sent several emails and letters to the Canyons School District at the end of 2021, asking them to remove from the shelves some books with content parents claimed were explicit.

"We do not want explicit pornographic materials in schools," said Nichole Mason, president of Utah Parents United. "Sex does not belong in a public school library," she added, referring to the nine titles parents have targeted for displaying illustrations and content they oppose. Utah Parents United is one of the groups that led this advocacy mission and was vocal about the "school's moral obligation to protect children and remove any harmful material school libraries may have," Mason said.

Utah Parents United has a list of books featuring content they label as pornographic and explicit.

"We have been on the news with this, and when we show them the images of these books, they need to blur them out," Mason said. "Yet this is what is on our public school library shelves."

In response to the large number of requests and emails Canyons School District received from groups like Utah Parents United, school officials decided to remove the nine most controversial titles from public school library shelves. This action violated the content review policy to which Canyons School District was subject.

"There was a feeling that we needed a pause," Canyons School District spokesperson Kirsten Stewart said when asked about why books were pulled off the shelves without following the review process stipulated in their policy.

Librarian associations and First Amendment advocacy groups have been outspoken about the seriousness and illegality of Canyons School District's actions.

"We do believe there is a place for a parent to question what books should be in a library," Utah Library Association Executive Director Mindy Hale said. "The problem with these recent attacks and book removals is that they are not following the policies."

Katie Wegner, the Intellectual Freedom Committee co-chair at Utah Library Association, said these actions by the Canyons School District would open the schools to possible civil lawsuits. One of the groups investigating the situation is the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah.

“This action violated the rights of students,” said John Mejia, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union. “It gave us great concern, particularly because a lot of these books were about marginalized and oppressed identities, and it’s important that students with these identities have access to books that relate to them and put them in a positive light.”

According to several librarians from the Utah Library Association, the real motivation of the Utah parents is not to remove obscene content, but to target those books dealing with race and LGBT issues. Many books out of the nine titles removed have queer or people-of-color protagonists such as “Gender Queer” by Maia Kobabe, “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison, “Beyond Magenta” by Susan Kuklin and “Lawn Boy” by Jonathan Evison. Mason said these allegations are completely false.

“These books clearly violate Utah state code, as they are pornographic in nature,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what race or sexuality it is: That is irrelevant, as those images are still pornography.”

The new Canyons School District policy for the “School Library Materials Selection and Review” was published on Jan. 4, and as of Jan. 20, the books pulled off the shelves have been returned to libraries.

“No action has been taken on any title at the moment,” Stewart said. “Those books are now back on the shelves and will be reviewed by the new policy by the board of education.” She said the new policy is balanced and provides clarity and transparency in how school officials select and review books.

Upon being informed of the action to return the books to the shelves, Mejia said the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah is still in the process of investigating and reaching out to school officials. However, Mejia said since the situation changed and there is a new policy, “We will most likely not sue them because our priority is that they reconsider, and although we need to confirm that, it seems like they have by returning the books.”