

## **Bill on 'sensitive materials' in Utah schools passes House committee**

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Posted at 8:50 PM, Feb 25, 2022 and last updated 9:55 PM, Feb 25, 2022

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SALT LAKE CITY — A bill to restrict what is termed "sensitive materials" in Utah schools is advancing in the state legislature.

The House Education Committee voted 11-2 on Friday to pass House Bill 374, which not only bans "sensitive materials," but requires school districts to evaluate objectionable content in libraries or classrooms and report it up to the Utah State Board of Education and ultimately, the legislature.

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"The policies they've adopted, complaints they've received and actions taken," said Rep. Ken Ivory, R-West Jordan, the bill's sponsor. "This is a first step, an important step."

The bill has been watered down from its original version which banned any sexual content. Instead, it now bans what is deemed "pornographic."

Utah Parents United, a group that has been pushing school districts statewide to remove books that they have objected to, argued that some books in school libraries are simply not appropriate for children and they are frustrated at some districts' inability or unwillingness to remove them.

"Our children, right now, are given unrestricted access to pornographic material in school libraries," said Nicole Mason.

Brooke Stephens, another member of the group, said she has had four books reviewed.

"None have been removed," she told the committee.

Rep. Ivory said there are dozens of materials in Utah schools "that shock the conscience."

Washington County School District Superintendent Larry Bergeson testified of legal threats whenever books are removed.

"After 40 years, I've watched the significant deterioration of family and moral values in our society that have affected students in our schools," he said, speaking in favor of the bill.

But the bill also faced some pushback. Some lawmakers were concerned with the bill involving the Utah Attorney General's Office in giving guidance.

Rep. Carol Spackman Moss, D-Holladay, said there may be some things in Shakespeare that would be deemed "sensitive." Rep. Moss later said she would reluctantly support the bill, but wanted to see some changes to it.

Lyla Mahmoud of the ACLU of Utah expressed concern about removing a number of books because some people disagree with the content.

"We recognize there are some books that are not appropriate to be in schools. But with this bill, what we're concerned about is books that come from a certain viewpoint will be selectively removed based on the pretext they involve sensitive materials," Mahmoud testified. "We're concerned that certain voices, Black and Brown authors, LGBTQ authors, or books centered around individuals in these groups are going to be removed."

House Minority Whip Karen Kwan, D-Taylorsville, said no one believes pornography should be in schools, but she had concerns about the bill.

"I have to speak out for the minority communities who are worried that our stories are going to be ignored, that our stories are going to be targeted," she said.

Rep. Steve Waldrip, R-Eden, said he did believe the amended bill struck a balance.

"To ban literature, art, the bar should be high," he warned.

The bill will now go to the full House of Representatives for a vote.