

Amid outcry over 'pornographic material,' Canyons School District revamps its book review policy

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Canyons School District has returned six of the nine books that were previously held from circulation at district libraries last fall after parents contacted the district upset over the content found in the books, claiming them to be explicit. (Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News)

SANDY — Canyons School District has returned six of the nine books that were previously held from circulation at district libraries last fall after parents contacted the district upset over the content found in the books, claiming them to be explicit.

"We had received numerous emails and phone calls from parents in the Canyons School District expressing concern about some of the titles that were in our school libraries," said Jeff Haney, communications director for Canyons School District.

Haney added that the district also received two GRAMA requests to review the titles of an entire collection of books at one high school, two middle schools and two elementary schools in the district.

Parental outcry

"I have come across many videos on social media about sexually explicit books in our Utah school libraries, and in school libraries around the country," a Canyons School District parent wrote in an email obtained by KSL.com through a public records request. "I am asking that you will spend the time to review the videos below for inappropriate material. There are many more but it is exhausting mentally, watching and reviewing these books' content."

"It wasn't just one parent who sent an email that triggered a review of the books and a look at our policy to see how we could strengthen and improve it — it was numerous," Haney said. "This has been a very long process with a lot of voices."

"Right now our children are exposed to pornography in school libraries."
—Nichole Mason, Utah Parents United

Utah Parents United is a parent group that has been pushing school districts across the state to remove books they say contain "pornographic or indecent material," as well as lobbying in support of HB374, a bill that bans "sensitive materials" and requires school districts to evaluate objectionable content in libraries or classrooms and report it to the Utah State Board of Education and, ultimately, the Legislature.

The House Education Committee on Friday voted 11-2 to pass HB374.

"Right now, our children are exposed to pornography in school libraries," said Nichole Mason, president of Utah Parents United. "They have unrestricted access to graphic pornographic novels that, really, are against the law."

Mason said that the group went to the Legislature to "ask for help" with removing the titles from school libraries after being unsuccessful through district channels as well as through the state school board.

Holding a copy of "The Bluest Eye," by Toni Morrison, Marcus Carr, a grandparent who has students in Utah schools, said that he doesn't have a problem with the book but doesn't think it should be accessible to students.

"This is very offensive, as an African American — period," Carr said. "I read this whole book and was very disgusted."

"Why would any parent want their kids reading stuff like this at that sensitive of an age?" he asked.

Reworking the policy

The outcry sparked Canyons School District to take a step back and reevaluate its policy for reviewing school library materials.

Under the old policy, the only people who could officially challenge a book in a Canyons School District library were parents who had a student in the school where the book being challenged was located. In the event of an official challenge, the book or books in question would remain in circulation until the review could be completed.

Speaking about the nine titles that were temporarily removed from circulation, Haney told KSL.com, "There wasn't an official challenge because those parents didn't have standing (to request a review) under the policy." Thus, the books were removed from circulation while the district worked to update its book review policy.

"The books were placed under review until the new policy could be reviewed and clarified," Haney said. Under the new policy, which has been in place since the Canyons Board of Education approved it on Jan. 4, parents, guardians, school administrators and members of the board of education can request local reviews of books.

"As we improved and strengthened the policy, the books that were under review were then evaluated based on the criteria that were established in that new policy," Haney said.

The books that were removed from circulation in November include:

- "The Bluest Eye," by Toni Morrison: a novel about a young Black girl who prays to change her race so she can be accepted. Some are concerned about the books sexually explicit material and graphic language.
- "Beyond Magenta," by Susan Kuklin: a nonfiction book about six transgender teens.
- "Monday's Not Coming," by Tiffany Jackson: a fiction book about a Black middle school girl who goes missing and no one notices. The book has a 14-and-older recommendation for sexual content.
- "Out of Darkness," by Ashley Hope Perez: a novel set in 1937 in New London, Texas, that examines segregation, love, family and racism.
- "The Opposite of Innocent," by Sonya Sones: a coming-of-age novel about a 14-year-old in love with an adult male friend of her parents.
- "Lawn Boy," by Jonathan Evison: a semi-autobiographical coming of age novel that examines race, class and whether everyone has access to the American dream.
- "Lolita," by Vladimir Nabokov: the story of a middle-aged professor who is obsessed with a 12-year-old girl and engages in a pedophilic relationship with her. This is one of the few classics on the list, as it is widely considered among the top 100 novels written.
- "Gender Queer," by Maia Kobabe: a graphic novel in which Kobabe discusses sexual orientation and gender identity. This book has made headlines recently for causing controversy in other states, including Texas.
- "L8R G8R," by Lauren Myracle: a novel written in instant messaging text that has become the country's No. 1 banned book due to sexual content.
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"'Lawn Boy,' 'Gender Queer,' and 'Lolita' were removed from the catalog either because they were weeded as part of the regular de-selection process done by librarians, or were checked out by a student and never returned," Haney said.

"Based on reports that the Canyons School District has returned the previously banned books to their library shelves, we have closed our investigation into that issue. But this incident is a reminder that students have rights that schools must respect, even in the face of pressure to limit those rights. We will remain vigilant for any further instances of library book removals or limitations at Canyons," said John Mejia, ACLU of Utah legal director, in a statement.

Jason Stevenson, spokesman for ACLU of Utah, told KSL.com that they were looking into the three titles that were removed from circulation.

'One type of voice matters'

Since the books were initially removed from Canyons School District libraries, some organizations have spoken out against removal, saying that the books being removed focus on diverse stories from diverse perspectives.

"Unfortunately, diverse stories, people and themes make some people uneasy, and those books are the most challenged by parents. A lack of representation in library books and programs is a disservice that affects students, families and the whole community," said Rita Christensen, president of the Utah Library Association.

"The value of literature exists to spark thought and reflection about our own experiences and the experiences of others. This strengthens our students and community."

–Rita Christensen, Utah Library Association

Christensen said that removing books from circulation due to parental outcry sets a precedent "that one type of voice matters," and "that voice doesn't have to follow the rules, and that the voices of the marginalized have no place on library shelves. It erodes trust in libraries (and) it erodes democracy." Christensen added, "Abandoning constitutional principles, bypassing legal and transparent processes and ignoring the rule of law while imposing personal, political, or moral values on others is a dangerous pattern that is anti-rule of law, anti-democracy and anti-American."

When asked about critics of HB374 saying that the books being targeted were disproportionately focusing on the experiences of diverse groups, Mason said that the issue is with pornography.

"Pornography is pornography," Mason said. "It does not matter what color the author is or what color the people engaging in the sex acts are, pornographic, explicit material should not be shown to minors in K-12 schools."

Christensen said that "teachers and librarians stand with parents in acknowledging the importance of keeping students safe." But, she added, "Restricting access to diverse titles limits learning and student success. The value of literature exists to spark thought and reflection about our own experiences and the experiences of others. This strengthens our students and community. Students should be able to read and see themselves in stories, which helps to shape a positive identity and to have new experiences and opportunities to learn about different cultures and people, creating empathy, cultural understanding and connection to others in our community and the world."

Haney said that since the onset of this debate, the district has maintained two positions: "No book had been banned in the Canyons District and that we needed to clarify the policy that governed library-book acquisition and review in our schools. This truly has been about process — and we followed our transparent internal processes to make sure that the update to the policy was responsive to the many voices in our community while also adhering to legal and educational guidelines."