

Opinion: We're not banning books; just making sure they're age-appropriate

Our students range in age from 5 to 17 years old. The First Amendment, which we all revere, is not a blank check for any and all material for any and all age groups

By Terry Hutchinson

April 7, 2022 2:41 p.m. MDT

Deseret News

<https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2022/4/7/23013684/utah-st-george-school-district-books-age-appropriate-not-banned>

I am one of seven elected members of the Board of Education for Washington County, Utah. I am responding to Jason M. Groth, of the ACLU of Utah ([Book banning is alive and well in Utah](#), published April 2 by the Deseret News). I am writing in my individual capacity, but I speak for local school board members everywhere who desire, as elected representatives over schools, to provide educational materials and ensure those materials are not in violation of state law or community standards.

For almost three decades, I have done a daily book review program on the radio in St. George, where I promote books, reading and education. I served on the Washington County Library Board for eight years, where we passed a bond doubling the number of libraries and their capacity from 1993-2001. I am all for books and literacy. Bans are not something I support. I do, however, support responsible reading for children and younger readers.

Groth argues that attempts to remove some material from our schools is because they “focus on race and LGBTQ+ issues.” He claims the challenges are an “attempt to silence Black, brown and LGBTQ+ authors and their communities.” With all due respect — this is not the case. The books and graphic novels simply are not age-appropriate.

I have said elsewhere in print, in response to the author of one of the challenged books, “We have a need for our public discourse and our educational experience to be more inclusive. Authors such as [Ashlee Hope Perez](#), and others, in their admirable attempts to help young readers understand underrepresented or publicized groups, have often not kept in mind the age and circumstances of their proposed audience. This debate isn’t about diversity. Education should provide for broadening the knowledge of the students. The debate is and should be about responsibility — to ensure that age-appropriate materials are being provided. I invite Perez and other authors to take this into account and add their important subject matter and voices to the conversation at an age-appropriate level. It would be welcomed!”

Many of the authors who write for young people about these so-called “underrepresented” communities, place graphic depictions of sex, incest, violence, suicide and other such life experiences in ways that are not appropriate for minors. Our students range in age from 5 to 17 years old. The First Amendment, which we all revere, is not a blank check for any and all material for any and all age groups.

The standard most commonly applied to school libraries is one which didn’t garner the support of the majority of the U.S. Supreme Court, but only a third of its members; yet, the threat of costly litigation has prevented schools from seeking additional clarification. School districts everywhere, no matter how well-funded, don’t want to take valuable funds away from educational purposes to litigate and further clarify a Supreme Court case that is 45 years old. We feel deeply our fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers and this concern is too often taken

advantage of by those who believe that parents and communities don't have the ability to determine what's in their schools.

Public school libraries have an obligation to be closely curated for appropriate age level material — regardless of subject matter. History, math, science, social studies and everything else is not meaningful unless the student can process it in a context they can understand at their age.

The complex issues of sexual behavior as well as gender identity, racial relations and others are no exceptions. Even so, any reasonable definition of students' rights needs to acknowledge that the students' rights are and should be determined in association with their parents. Parents are the ones who have the legal duty to make these decisions.

Once again, I invite and encourage authors who desire to tell the stories of underrepresented communities and groups to tell those stories in such a way that students do not get distracted or overwhelmed with content above their maturity level, in order to help all of us better understand one another. Attempts to manage the curricula to protect students is not an attack on those groups and should never be construed as such.

Terry Hutchinson serves on the Washington County Board of Education.