

As chairman of the “Book Review Committee”, I would like to share why the committee was formed and what it hopes to accomplish. After the Board was made aware of books in our libraries that contained such obscene language they could not be read out loud at a school board meeting, some board members wanted to know the process for books making their way onto our school library shelves.

We were told by Dr. Towns the books in our libraries are up to the librarian in each individual school. I was sent this statement by Dr. Towns- “Our librarians come under the oversight of the K-12 academic team led by Blake Freeman, who reports to our Chief of Schools, Dr. Neelie Parker. Our Pre-K director, Becky Covington, has organized the Librarian Leadership Team (made of representatives from schools across the district) and meets with them regularly to discuss the alignment of their work per the Librarian Handbook. The overarching goal is to ensure our libraries support student learning.”

After hearing this explanation, I looked at our policies concerning library books to see what may need to be changed to prevent books with obscene language and sexual content from being placed in HCDE libraries. Tucker McClendon, Board Chairman, suggested forming a committee to look at some of the books as well as our policies to see what recommendations might be made to the Board to ensure the same standards are being followed in every school.

The committee is reviewing School Board Policies 4.402 – Selection of Instructional Materials (Other than Textbooks) and 4.403 – Reconsideration of Instructional Materials and Textbooks. Both of these policies can be found on the HCDE.org website.

Policy 4.402 says this about the selection of instructional material (other than textbooks), “The Director of Schools, or designee, will establish an administrative procedure for review and selection of materials subject to policy. Particular attention will be paid to addressing the suitability of instructional materials that include content which might be considered sensitive by parents or students (for example, materials that contain coarse language, graphic violence, explicit sexual content, illegal drugs, or alcohol). The Director of Schools, or designee will also establish a procedure for the reconsideration of approved materials as may be requested by parents or staff members.”

However, the last paragraph in the policy states, “Parental disclosure and prior notice does not include books located in the school library or classroom that are intended to provide *optional* reading material on each student’s individual reading level. These books will continually be monitored; however, there may be sensitive content contained in these books that was not previously reviewed by school personnel. Parents should alert the administration about any sensitive content that is found in these optional materials. Administration will then undertake the reconsideration process as outlined in Policy .403”.

It looks like some books were not being “continually monitored”. If they were, some of these books surely would not be in school libraries and this committee would not be necessary. The idea that some books may contain “sensitive content..not previously reviewed by school personnel” is not very comforting. This policy needs to be enhanced so these books never make it to library book shelves to begin with and it should not be up to parents to “alert the administration” if they find any sensitive content.

Policy 4.402 was revised in 2018. I was on the board when it was proposed. I assumed school administrators and librarians would ensure books approved for students would have an “educational purpose”. I have yet to see an educational purpose for much of the contents in some of these books.

I have been told I may be violating students’ First Amendment rights by suggesting some books containing obscene language and sexual content are not appropriate for minors. I say it may be just the opposite. The committee members who think library books using the F word, MF, and GD repeatedly and illustrations showing masturbation, are appropriate for school age children may need to look at their position. There are laws protecting students from obscene material, Tennessee Code Title 39-17-901. The Tennessee legislature is looking to enhance this law as well as other laws to protect children.

I have asked for all committee meetings to be live streamed and materials to be posted on the HCDE website. I think it is important for all parents to know the truth and see what is being made available to their children.

The next Book Review Committee meeting will be Tuesday, February 22, at 5:30 p.m. in the Central Office Board Room at 3074 Hickory Valley Road.

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