

December 1, 2021

Honorable Chairperson Williams, and Members of the Interim Committee on Student Achievement:

My name is Tamara Seyler-James. My husband and I are the parents of four children, all of whom have attended, or are attending, Blue Valley Schools in Overland Park. We have been Blue Valley parents continuously since 1998. I thank you for this opportunity to address the critical topic of student achievement in our Kansas public schools. I wish to pay particular attention to school library holdings and the parental demand for higher standards.

The goal of my testimony is three-fold:

- To describe certain objectionable books held in our public school libraries¹;
- To examine *why* our schools would offer children such books, with reference to third-party influences and education theories;
- And to point out how materials of this nature undermine, rather than promote, student achievement and parental control.

When controversy erupted nationwide over salacious books in schools, I wanted to know if the problem was also local. I was shocked at what I found in our Blue Valley school libraries:

- I found a memoir with sex scenes that fit the definition of “obscene” under Kansas law, specifically, Kansas Statute 21-6401, in that the book contains “descriptions of ... ultimate sexual acts.” This book is held in four of our five high school libraries.²
- I found a so-called “Young Adult” book with teen dialogue that would violate our District code of student conduct. That code subjects students to “corrective measures” for engaging in “obscenity, profanity, or indecency,”³

yet this book unabashedly models such behavior. It is also in four of our five high schools.⁴

- I found a work of fiction that depicts a sexual encounter involving a 4th grader and either an adult or an older teen. There is at least the suggestion of pedophilia. That book is in two of our high schools.⁵
- I discovered a *picture* book for *elementary school children* about “whiteness” that calls “whiteness” a “bad deal” and suggests “whiteness” is the work of the devil. This book is evidence in an Equal Protection and Title VI lawsuit now pending in federal court in Illinois.⁶ The book is held in two Blue Valley elementary schools and one middle school.⁷
- And I found a novel about a girl abducted by a man at age ten from a school field trip. She is held captive and repeatedly raped by him over the course of five years, until he tires of her and craves a substitute victim. This is one of the most disturbing books I have ever read. That book is in three of our high schools and in one middle school.⁸

Why are these books in our schools?

Learning resources *should* feature a broad diversity of people and experiences. The laudable push to diversify children’s literature began several decades ago and is sometimes described as offering children “windows” into different worlds and “mirrors” to students as a means of self-affirmation.⁹

However, “windows,” “mirrors,” and “self-affirmation” must not come at the expense of high standards. No one needs a window, for example, into the kidnapping and rape of a child.

Schools regrettably depend on third-party vendors and interest groups to steer their purchases;¹⁰ these third-parties aggregate book reviews and awards, prepare content summaries, then feed this information to local decision-makers who don’t have the time to screen every title but are trying to keep their collections current, relevant, and diversified by interest and identity group.

The results of this process are two-fold: (1) the offering of degraded and divisive resources to students; and (2) the alienation of the parent community. According

to our District, only 56-percent of Blue Valley students rate “effective or higher” in reading on the Kansas Assessments.¹¹ Expletive-laden “Young Adult” books will not improve this metric.

When parents object to the coarse or politicized nature of school library books, organizations such as School Library Journal, one of those prominent outside influencers, accuse them of “censorship.”¹² Or, outlets such as NBC News accuse them of “interfer[ence],” with the remarkable statement that “[p]art of the problem is that parents think they have the right to control teaching and learning because their children are the ones being educated.”¹³

But THIS is Kansas law: “It shall be the public policy of this state that parents shall retain the fundamental right to exercise primary control over the care and upbringing of their children in their charge.” [K.S.A. sec. 38-141]

If our schools continue to offer students degraded learning resources and fail to respect the right of parents to demand higher standards, the result will not only be a stumbling-block to student success, but an exodus from our public schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

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¹ Blue Valley School District library holdings may be verified on the District website: Bluevalleyk12.org → Academics → Programs → Blue Valley Libraries.

² Johnson, George M. 2020. *All boys aren't blue: a memoir-manifesto*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux BYR, Ch. 15: “Losing My Virginity Twice”.

³ <https://go.boarddocs.com/ks/usd229/Board.nsf/Public?open&id=policies#> (Policy 3500 – “Behavior and Discipline”).

⁴ Stone, Nic. 2018. *Odd One Out*. Random House Children’s Books. By the Conferee’s count (Kindle-search), there are no fewer than 205 instances of profanity in the text.

⁵ Evison, Jonathan. 2018. *Lawn boy: a novel*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, “The Flying Saltshaker” (Ch. 4); “TMI” (Ch. 18).

⁶ Complaint, Deemar v. Board of Ed. of the City of Evanston/Skokie, et al. (N.D. Ill., Eastern Div.) (Case: 1:21-cv-03466), ¶ 3; <https://345h6j74bj93ldnop2phvizr-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2021/06/202106029-Deemar-v.-D65-Complaint.pdf>

⁷ Higginbotham, Anastasia. 2018. *Not my idea: a book about whiteness*. Dottir Press.

⁸ Scott, Elizabeth. 2008. *Living dead girl*. Simon Pulse.

⁹ <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

¹⁰ According to discussions between the Conferee and Blue Valley library officials, two such vendors to the Blue Valley School District are Follett Corporation (follett.com) and Mackin (mackin.com).

¹¹ “Blue Valley Today” (Winter 2021), p. 7 (“KANSAS ASSESSMENTS ... 56.31% effective or higher **in reading**”).

¹² See, e.g., Kara Yorio. “When the Anti-CRT Movement Comes for Collections,” *School Library Journal*, Nov. 10, 2021, <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=when-the-anti-crt-movement-comes-for-collections-slj-summit>

¹³ Christina Wyman, “Schools face parents who want to ban critical race theory – and don’t get how teaching works,” *NBC News*, Nov. 18, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/schools-face-parents-who-want-ban-critical-race-theory-don-ncna1284185?cid=sm_npd_nn_tw_ma