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Body

A change in the Roanoke County school system's media policy prompted a debate and concerns, including from the division's head librarian, according to emails obtained by The Roanoke Times through the Virginia Freedom of Information Act.

Before being added to a school's collection, two elementary school librarians must now read and write a review for each book. One is required to read and write a review at the middle and high school levels.

Additionally, all librarians at each level must agree the book should be added.

The new policy - more restrictive than the one it replaces - comes after a book, "When Aidan Became a Brother," was removed from Herman L. Horn Elementary, amid debate.

That book is about a transgender boy wanting to be a good brother to his new sibling, and according to school system documents, the mentioning of gender identity in the book is what led to the complaint by a parent, which ultimately got the book removed after a lengthy appeals process beginning in mid November.

According to the dates of those documents, a committee to revise the policy was already formed by the time the book was removed from circulation in early January, though the school system has maintained the policy was not revised due to the book's removal.

Emails obtained by The Roanoke Times show the school system's head librarian and others expressed concerns about parts of the policy.

Heather Balsley, lead librarian for Roanoke County schools, wrote in a Jan. 2 email to Michael Riley and Stephanie Hogan, the directors of secondary and elementary instruction: "We feel the other committee members are unaware of how many books that would involve [reading and reviewing] for the high school," she wrote, referencing non-librarians also on the committee tasked to overhaul the media selection policy.

Balsley also wrote that others were "concerned about the time-intensive nature of this task on our already overworked colleagues, particularly at the secondary level."

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She noted concerns to the administration about a blanket policy of allowing anyone to challenge any book, without some sort of guidelines on what can be challenged.

"Young adult books aren't published without having a topic that may be considered sensitive to someone based on their biases. That is the nature of this age level," Balsley wrote. "We feel a definitive line needs to be drawn as to what goes to the committee because what is controversial to one person isn't to another."

When asked this week about her January email to school administration and the new policy in general, Balsley responded in an email she'd been instructed to direct all media questions to school division spokesman Chuck Lionberger.

Neither of those issues raised were resolved in the final draft of the policy, which the school board passed unanimously late last month.

A parent can now challenge a book for any reason, which can lead to a lengthy appeals process where the school board chooses five parents to serve on a committee, with the final step being the school board voting on whether a book should be available to students.

Librarians also asked the school system to implement a policy where those elected to the appeals committees would have no prior relationship with the parent making the complaint, a provision that was also not added to the final policy.

Another librarian raised concerns with administration in April about the way the position of the librarians in the committee was misrepresented as it concerned the appeals process of a book.

The school system told The Roanoke Times librarians wanted to remove parents from the appeals process, but later corrected that after Northside Middle School Librarian Lauren Sprouse contacted Lionberger and Superintendent Ken Nicely about the quote.

"We have tried to be as gracious as possible in being asked to work under a selection policy that has no precedence in any library, school or public," Sprouse wrote in the June 22 email. "We have kept our heads down and tried to figure out how to make this work because we truly want what is best for our students and our schools, which is for us to continue to provide quality reading materials and an upbeat attitude and atmosphere."

"The comments you made to the newspaper [The Roanoke Times] reflected poorly on librarians. Librarians were not alone on that committee and you misunderstood and misrepresented the intentions of the proposed appeals committee."

"We already felt undervalued and unappreciated. These comments also made it seem like we are not playing on the same team, which I don't think is the case."

The new Roanoke County policy is different than other such district policies in the region, based on earlier reporting by The Roanoke Times.

Sprouse did not immediately respond to a request for additional comment.

Nicely has said the idea to have multiple faculty members read the books before putting them into circulation came from within the district, though he could not recall from whom.

He responded to Sprouse's email, writing in part, "I think you guys as librarians have dealt with the situation professionally and responsibly which we appreciate. None of us want to be in this situation to begin with of course."

He also wrote that he tells "folks over and over again that librarians have done an outstanding job in selecting books as evidenced in the extremely low number of book challenges we have had."

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"We do value the expertise of librarians which is why we have advocated for keeping the selection decisions in the hands of librarians."

"I am sorry that the Roanoke Times has chosen the path they have chosen and, unfortunately, sometimes their questions seem designed to twist things around," he wrote.

Other emails also show the school board, with members who have stated on numerous occasions they do not draft policy but only implement it, did in fact play a bigger role in forming the policy.

Nicely wrote to Hogan and Riley in an April 18 email giving them an update on where the board was at regarding the new policy.

"I reviewed this with [board member] Tim [Greenway] this morning and I think we can get board support for this with one exception: changing the second appeals committee to be parents appointed by all 5 board members and with you, a principal and Heather serving as non-voting members," he wrote.

Greenway appointed a member of the committee that ultimately decided to remove "When Aidan Became a Brother," from the collection, as it was in the Vinton district he represents.

Additionally, board Chairman David Linden responded to someone worried about the book "The Court of Mist and Fury" in an April 25 email, stating "It will not be placed in circulation or made available to students until it has gone through the process of being reviewed. The RCPS Board is in the process of reviewing policy on library books and ensuring the materials contained in the books are age-appropriate."

Board member Brent Hudson responded in an email shortly after, writing "how about will never be put into circulation."

When asked about the email this week, Hudson said he was unprepared to answer the question, and didn't know if the book was inappropriate or not, but didn't want age inappropriate books in schools.

Linden said in late May: "We've been made aware, but not overly involved. We were not on any committees."

Board member **Cheryl Facciani** wrote to a resident concerned with the policy being a form of **censorship**.

"To reiterate, this is not an act of censorship. This is a proactive policy protecting students from inappropriate content and pornography," she wrote on June 26. "So far, our current librarians have done a good job protecting our students. We would like to see to it that we have a sound policy in place to continue to do so."

A number of school systems in the region use some form of reputable, professional selection aids, such as professional review journals, core collection tools and conference presentations when selecting media for vetting, which was Roanoke County's former policy as well.

The ACLU of Virginia also criticized the school system's new policy last month on social media, saying it was "an absurd burden to put on school librarians and a tactic of censorship. This policy should fail."

Residents have also taken notice of the policy, with a change.org petition called "Roanoke County Public Schools: Revise Your Media Policy," having received 780 signatures since the policy passed at the end of June.

A detailed copy of the new policy can be found on the school system's website on the school board's page under "policy manual and admin. Regulations," then scrolling to policy 6.40 "Libraries as Media Centers."

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