

How 9 books started a fight over censorship and pornography in this Utah school district

Canyons School District removed the controversial titles against policy, and they are now under review.

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A list of nine books has started a bitter battle in a Utah school district over pornography and censorship and who can control what students read.

The latest culture confrontation began about a month ago, when a mom first emailed administrators at [Canyons School District](#) about the titles that she found concerning. She had heard about them on social media and discovered they were in the high school libraries in her district's suburbs at the south end of Salt Lake County.

"There are many more but it is exhausting, mentally, watching and reviewing these books' content," she wrote in a letter that has since been shared widely online by conservative groups.

The books she listed all focus on race and the LGBTQ community, including "The Bluest Eye" by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison and "Gender Queer," a graphic novel about the author's journey of self-identity that has been [at the center of the growing movement over banning books in school districts across the country](#).

The mom copied on her email a member of [Utah Parents United](#), the group that has led efforts against masking in schools and in favor of [dropping a social-emotional learning program, also at Canyons, because it linked to a site about sex](#).

And from there, debate over the books erupted.

Canyons spokesman Jeff Haney said the district has received hundreds of emails about the books and from parents who want to add more to the list for being "too explicit." Utah Parents United has also since released an hourlong video encouraging its members to call their local police departments when they come across materials like this at their school libraries.

Pushing back against them is a growing list of advocates. Librarians and civil rights attorneys who support keeping the books on library shelves say this conflict is about limiting what viewpoints students can seek out on their own with a library card, especially diverse viewpoints from historically marginalized groups. None of the titles, they stress, are required reading.

Richard Price, an associate professor of political science at Weber State [who tracks censorship in school districts](#), said: "If you don't want to look at it, then you don't have to check it out. But I fear what this group is trying to do is forbid all people from reading them. They're trying to parent for all parents."

In response to the crossfire, the district has decided to temporarily pull the original nine titles from library shelves until it can further review them and its own policy for handling challenges.

UNDER REVIEW

The books under review in the Canyons School District are:

- "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison, about an 11-year-old Black girl growing up in Ohio that includes scenes about racism and molestation.
- "Gender Queer" by Maia Kobabe, which has drawn particular attention for its cartoon drawing of oral sex, but it also covers the confusion around young crushes and being yourself in society.
- "Beyond Magenta" by Susan Kuklin, a nonfiction book based on interviews with six transgender and gender neutral young adults.
- "18r, g8r" by Lauren Myracle, the third book in a series written in instant messages about three friends navigating high school. Parents have protested this novel because it includes drug use and an inappropriately flirtatious teacher.
- "Lawn Boy" by Jonathan Evison, about a young Mexican American boy examining what it means to be Brown in this country.

- “Lolita” by Vladimir Nabokov, which is the only traditionally classic novel on the list and tells the story of a professor’s pedophilic relationship with a 12-year-old girl.
- “Monday’s Not Coming” by Tiffany Jackson, which is a fictional story about a Black girl who goes missing and whose disappearance is dismissed as “just another runaway.” The book delves into racism, mental illness, friendship and consent, received the Coretta Scott King-John Steptoe Award for New Talent.
- “The Opposite of Innocent” by Sonya Sones, a story about a teenage girl with a crush on one of her parents’ male friends.
- “Out of Darkness” by Ashley Hope Pérez, about the relationship between a young Mexican American girl and a Black teenage boy in 1930s Texas.

A problem with policy

The mom stood at the podium and turned to page 200 in the book. She began to read aloud.

The excerpt started with one character telling another: “Get your hand off my butt.” From there, it gets more explicit, detailing an older cousin molesting a younger boy.

The mom, Jessica Anderson, told the school board for Canyons District that she found the book at Alta High School in Sandy. “This book should have never been available to any student,” she added during the board meeting on Nov. 8.

One board member urged her to stop reading. Another, Mont Millerberg, shook his head and thanked Anderson for bringing it to their attention. He added: “My question is not if those should be taken out or not — that’s intuitive. My question is, ‘How the hell did they get in there in the first place?’”

Anderson was reading from a book, [“All Boys Aren’t Blue” by LGBTQ activist George M. Johnson](#), which she and others with Utah Parents United are calling to be added to the list of titles to be pulled. They say every book in the district needs to be reviewed for sexual content.

“The current policies and practices are not working,” Anderson said.

Many of the books in Canyons School District’s libraries are not directly reviewed by school librarians who place them on the shelves. Some are given to the district for free, for instance, and placed in the collection without any more formal process. That’s typical in most schools.

But [the district’s current written policy, approved mostly recently in May 2020](#), only allows someone with a direct tie to a school — a student who attends there, a parent of a child who attends there, or an employee who works there — to raise concerns about a book in that specific school’s library. The mom who sent the first email has students in middle and elementary school in Canyons; the books she raised alarms about are in four high schools in the district: Alta, Brighton, Corner Canyon and Jordan.

Haney said if someone objecting to a book doesn’t fit the criteria in the policy, then the district’s board is instructed to “respond with silence” and ignore the complaint.

The board, which leans conservative and represents a more right-leaning area of the county, has decided that approach doesn’t work, after hearing Anderson read the explicit paragraphs. It is now redrafting the policy to be broader and allow for anyone to bring up concerns that will be heard by the full board.

Haney said a committee has already met twice to work on revisions. A new draft is expected to come before the board next week at its regular Tuesday meeting.

Concerns about censorship

Those who oppose removing the books note that the policy does still state that titles are supposed to “remain in use during the challenge process” until a committee can read them and decide if they are appropriate for students. They argue that Canyons violated that by taking the books away from students before that plays out. [The ACLU of Utah](#) has called it “a reminder [that] constitutional protections cannot be simply ignored.”

A joint statement from the [Utah Educational Library Media Association](#), [Utah Library Association](#) and Utah Library Media Supervisors said due process must be followed to protect the First Amendment and all students’ rights to access diverse literature.

The state’s largest teachers union has joined them, as has [the National Coalition Against Censorship](#). Several other national groups are signing on, too, including the Authors Guild, the National Council of Teachers of English and PEN America. Each has written a letter to Canyons District, urging that the books be returned.

Even Republican Utah Gov. Spencer Cox cautioned against a knee-jerk reaction during his November news conference.

"I'm not saying every book should be in every classroom," the governor said. "But let's be thoughtful about it. Let's take a step back, take a deep breath and make sure that we're not doing something we'll regret. ... Any student of history knows that banning books never ends up well."

[State Sen. Kathleen Riebe, D-Cottonwood Heights](#), is considering running a bill in the upcoming legislative session that would require all public K-12 school districts and charters to follow a set process to review books under challenge before removing them from libraries.

Without set criteria, she and others worry that schools and school districts could easily throw out any material considered controversial by one parent; that one obscenity or one sex scene taken out of context could get a book tossed.

Libraries aim to expand readers' perspectives, including providing books on subjects outside their comfort zones, and an interested patron should be able to access such titles, book defenders say.

"When people can learn these things and read books, you can be so much kinder and compassionate and see outside of your bubble," said Wanda Mae Huffaker, a librarian with [the Salt Lake County library system](#).

Huffaker has studied intellectual freedom and defended books against being censored in Utah schools. When Davis School District [pulled the book "In Our Mothers' House," about lesbian moms, from its shelves in 2012](#), she helped get it returned. And the district was required to pay out legal fees and agree in a settlement to never remove a book again based solely on its LGBTQ content.

Huffaker also notes that curriculum — what students must learn in the classroom — is different and separate from content in libraries, and she asserts they cannot be held to the same standards.

Targeting the LGBTQ experience

The book that is causing the most division on the list of nine titles in Canyons School District is "Gender Queer" — [considered the top banned book in the country right now](#).

Huffaker says it's currently available in Salt Lake County's public libraries, where it's also been challenged but remains on shelves.

"When I read that one, I thought I don't understand what that feels like because I've never been there," she said.

"And it made me appreciate so much and to relate to that. It opened my eyes. That's what literature does."

Huffaker, who is 64, said she recalls a little girl who frequently came into the Tyler Branch in Midvale where she works. One day, the librarian asked her how many brothers and sisters she had. The girl struggled.

She said she had two brothers, two sisters and one sibling that was both a boy and a girl. Huffaker said that experience, shortly before reading "Gender Queer," also opened her eyes. And now she asks a more gender neutral question about siblings.

She worries what message removing the book sends to students like that or students who are LGBTQ and looking for a book that shows their experience. She believes those opposed to it are turning only to the controversial pages of the graphic novel, which does include some graphic depictions, and not considering the book as a whole.

Troy Williams, executive director for [Equality Utah](#), added: "This is about censorship. And it is immoral to try to deprive minority students in Utah from their culture and the voices that reflect their lives."

After the book was banned in Texas, author Maia Kobabe [told The Texas Tribune](#): "I also want to have the best interest of young people at heart. There are queer youth at every high school — and those students, that's [who] I'm thinking about, is the queer student who is getting left behind."

Utah Parents United, though, insists that the group is not trying to eradicate books about the gay community. They say their target is explicit sexual content. They call it pornography — both written and drawn in the form of the cartoons in "Gender Queer."

When asked for comment, the group said, "this is our statement," and shared tens of images from each of the books on its list, showing excerpts of explicit scenes, pages detailing the use of condoms and lubricants, sexual positions, and one encouraging masturbation. Others were screenshots of rape scenes.

"It's just so shocking," said Brooke Stephens, the curriculum director for Utah Parents United. "I think 'Gender Queer' needs to get out now."

She said the scene in the graphic novel where the main character is forced to perform oral sex on another man is beyond inappropriate for high schoolers, with those as young as 14 years old being able to check it out in Canyons School District.

“This isn’t about the left or right deciding no Dr. Seuss or no ‘Tom Sawyer,’” Stephens added. “It’s not about debatable books. It’s about explicit porn.”

But Price, the professor studying censorship at Weber State, who is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns, said it’s not about porn.

The examples of sex in the books on the list, including “Gender Queer,” aren’t about titillation, Price said. They’re about relationship imbalances and manipulation — often real experiences from the authors that are meant to show the reader how the situation is wrong and warn them if they’re going through something similar.

“It’s about figuring out where your boundaries are and drawing them. That’s very healthy,” Price said.

Amanda Darrow, the director of youth, family and education at [the Utah Pride Center](#), said that’s especially important in a conservative state where it can be difficult to be LGBTQ or talk openly about it.

Limiting books about being Black

Emma Houston, who works on diversity issues at the University of Utah, also worries that the targeted books are largely about experiences of race. Of the nine books, six directly address racism.

“It’s saying that we’re removing your lived experience. It’s saying that individuals who look like you are not valued,” said Houston, special assistant to the U.’s vice president of equity, diversity and inclusion.

She’s particularly concerned about Toni Morrison novels being removed. Morrison is an award-winning author who writes about what it means to be Black.

Utah Parents United say they object to “The Bluest Eye,” though, because of a rape scene; and Stephens points to her four adopted children, who are all Black and attend Davis School District ([where there have been severe cases of racism reported](#)) as a way to say that, to her, it’s not about race.

She says, though, that she believes parents should individually talk about race issues with their children. For instance, she does not support in-depth discussions about race and the history of slavery as a founding principle of America in the classroom.

But Houston says that should absolutely be allowed in books in the library. And, she added, the rape in “The Bluest Eye” is obviously brutal, but it’s a piece that can’t be overlooked. It’s part of the whole book as much as it’s part of a system that doesn’t help people of color when they experience assault, she said.

She also worries what’s next. Will Asian writers be removed? Hispanic authors? Will students only see one perspective about being white? Houston doesn’t support the books being removed, but if they are, she would like to see each book by an author of color replaced by another, to keep a diverse collection in school libraries.

In a statement, [the NAACP of Salt Lake](#) backed the review and said it believes all material should be age-appropriate.

“It is not about the titles but the contents within these books that the NAACP is concerned about through these book challenges,” said President Jeanetta Williams in a statement. “The NAACP would like to see the process play out.”

Price said it would be unfair to ignore that the challenges from the books are also largely coming from straight white women, the professor believes. Price noted that’s been a trend across the country, where book ban challenges are popping up largely in white suburbs that have been starting to become more diverse. That includes where Canyons School District sits in Salt Lake County.

‘It’s everywhere’

Utah Parents United is organizing to review books in every district in the state. And Stephens has [started a Facebook page](#) where parents can report titles to her that they find concerning. “It’s everywhere,” Stephens said.

“I don’t think people know what’s inside these books.”

A parent in [Washington County School District](#) in Southern Utah [sent a list of five titles to administrators there that she took issue with being in elementary schools](#). Those include “Julián is a Mermaid,” which is a picture book about a boy who wants to become a mermaid, as well as “The Hate U Give” by Angie Thomas. That book deals with racism and police brutality, and the parent said she objects to the profanities in it.

Washington County School District spokesman Steven Dunham said the district is following a set process to review the books, with a committee that is expected to read all of each one.

He said districts should balance what’s age appropriate with providing diverse titles that represent all kids.

"I also think it's interesting how parents are challenging these books in our libraries," he added. "This is the place that they think their children are going to be corrupted. But they are also giving them phones where they can look up anything."

The school board is expected to weigh in on the titles in January.

Haney, the Canyons spokesman, said the district there also cares about making sure titles are representative. He did a search of the library system in the district and found 102 titles with the keyword "transgender," 44 with "queer" and 31 with "LGBTQ."

But now some parents are asking for a full catalog of every book so they can review what's available.

Possible solutions are just as debated. Allowing parents to block books on a student's account won't stop them from looking at the same titles if their peers check them out, Stephens said.

And putting them in a separate office to check out is "othering," Darrow with the Utah Pride Center added. Some students might also not want their parents to know what they're reading, as it could reveal their identity, Darrow said.

This latest effort to ban books is the broadest and most organized Huffaker has ever seen, she said, and to her, seeing it play out feels like a campaign out of George Orwell's "1984."