

From masks to book banning, conservatives take on educators

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From masks to book banning, conservatives take on educators
by Mead Gruver, Associated Press
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Amanda Darrow, director of youth, family and education programs at the Utah Pride Center, poses with books that have been the subject of complaints from parents in recent weeks on Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021, in Salt Lake City. Parents who first packed school board meetings to express their opposition to mask mandates and other COVID-19 measures have since broadened their focus to other issues they say clash with conservative values, including teachings about social justice, gender, race and history. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — A recent Wyoming school board meeting was again packed with opponents of mask mandates when things took an abrupt turn and a parent started reading aloud sexually explicit passages from a book available in school libraries.

“Parents like myself had no idea this stuff was here,” the parent, Shannon Ashby, told trustees of Laramie County School District No. 1 in the capital city.

The push to remove objectionable books from school libraries is part of a renewed conservative interest in public education as a political issue since the start of the pandemic. Parents who first packed school board meetings to express their opposition to mask mandates and other COVID-19 measures have since broadened their focus to other issues they say clash with conservative values, including teachings about social justice, gender, race and history.

“If you put pictures to the material that was read, our superintendent would be in jail for trafficking in kiddie porn,” said Darin Smith, a local attorney and former Republican congressional candidate whose wife is on the school board. “I would never have known these extreme leftists that are controlling our school district had I not gone to voice my opposition to the masking.”

The award-winning book Ashby wants pulled from Cheyenne high school and middle schools, “Monday's Not Coming,” by Tiffany D. Jackson, is a novel about the mysterious disappearance of a Black teenager. Supporters say it contains important messages about topics such as poverty, child abuse and friendship, though it does include scenes such as a boy and a girl having sex on a teacher’s desk.

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Ashby also read allusions to sex acts in “Traffick,” by Ellen Hopkins, a novel about teenagers victimized by sex trafficking.

Similar disputes over public school curricula and books arose recently in Virginia, where with help from former Vice President Mike Pence they became a major issue in Republican Glenn Youngkin’s successful campaign for governor.

They’ve also been a political issue in the Carolinas and Texas while school officials in Kansas pulled almost 30 books from shelves after a complaint but soon returned them.

In Utah, the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union opened an investigation in November after a suburban Salt Lake City district removed several books including "The Bluest Eye," by Toni Morrison, pending investigation into a parent complaint. Other books that have been the subject of complaints in the city's schools include titles with LGBTQ characters and plot lines.

"There is a wave of well-funded, well-organized attacks in our schools and looking to remove library books from the shelves," Utah Education Association President Heidi Matthews said.

Library organizations are pushing back, pointing out that many of the books in question depict struggles of minorities. Efforts to remove them send a message to minority youth that their views don't matter, said Deborah Caldwell Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

"It's a terrible message to send to young people," Stone said. "For me, it's just astonishing that so many groups that use 'liberty' in their names, that claim that they're all for freedom and the individual right to exercise freedom, resort so quickly to use censorship."

Ashby belongs to Moms for Liberty, a conservative group that says it challenges "short-sighted and destructive" policies in public schools.

Wyoming's top education official, however, questioned whether the book disputes are a fundamentally conservative cause.

"Labeling this as a 'conservative' issue is a disservice to parents and their children. We should embrace parents wanting to engage with their children's education, not label them," Superintendent of Public Instruction Jillian Balow, a Republican, said in a statement Thursday.

In September, Balow joined Wyoming's Republican legislative leaders in supporting proposed state legislation to counter the teaching of "critical race theory," which has become a catch-all term for efforts to teach that systemic racism remains a persistent problem in the U.S. Opponents of those efforts say they are divisive and counterproductive.

Balow noted that disputes over books aren't new. Since the 1970s, for example, several books by children's and young adult author Judy Blume have been banned from schools and libraries for everything from sexuality to endings people didn't like. Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is another frequent target due to racist language.

Ashby said she first heard about the books in the Cheyenne district after tuning in to conservative podcasts. She then checked an online school library book database to see which books mentioned in the podcasts were in Cheyenne.

"I figured living in Cheyenne, Wyoming, we would be safe," said Ashby, who removed her three children from the district at the start of the school year because of the mask mandate.

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Cheyenne school officials haven't begun reviewing the books Ashby opposes because nobody has filed a formal complaint, Superintendent Margaret Crespo said.

Crespo said book opponents at school board meetings represent a small fraction of the community and not those who've written or spoken to school officials in support, though the district has begun adjusting its policies for books, including how they are purchased and checked out.

Opponents of the books gained one school board member's sympathy after district officials deleted Ashby's reading of the sexual material from an online video out of concern YouTube could suspend the district's account.

"If we have books in our system that are not appropriate to be read at our school board meeting, then maybe they're not appropriate to be read in our school district," Trustee Christy Klaassen said to applause and cheers at a school board meeting Dec. 6.

The district has an opt out policy for parents who don't want their children to check out books with mature content but should consider an "opt in" policy instead, said Klaassen, whose husband was the Donald Trump-appointed U.S. attorney for Wyoming until January.

On the night Ashby read to the school board, just one person spoke in favor of the mask mandate or keeping the books.

"Parents should read what their kids are reading, and if they don't approve it, don't let them read it. That doesn't mean that they have the right to make that decision for every other family," Dr. Renee Hinkle, a local obstetrician, said over heckling.

Mendee Cotton, a grandparent of seven local students, told the Cheyenne school board that what was in the books was "pornography, pedophilia" and parents wouldn't stop until they were gone.

"The sleeping giant is awake. You affected our kids and now we are angry," she said. "Make no mistake, this is a war."

Associated Press writer Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City contributed to this report.