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## School board presented with measure that would restrict what students may or may not read

Measure was drafted following an incident at Appoquinimink High School's literature circle.

Appoquinimink School Board of Education members took on the issue of appropriate reading material for students at their monthly meeting on Dec. 9 after a newly-drafted measure was put before the board to give parents a stronger say on what books their children may or may not read.

Nine people spoke up during the delegations portion of the meeting, most in favor of stopping the district from adopting a policy they deemed unprecedented and controversial. The measure, which was presented to the board by the district's director of secondary education, Ray Gravuer, would require a teacher to distribute permission slips to students that a parent would have to sign to allow his or her child to read any required class material. The measure would also apply to material a student chooses to read on his or her own.

If the parent does not give permission to read the material, the teacher would have to assign alternate reading material on the same subject matter, the draft measure states.

Gravuer told board members that the measure would help make sure the materials the students read is age appropriate.

"There has been concern and controversy within the district about the appropriateness of books and media sources," Gravuer told the board. "Just to be clear, we are not banning books or censoring books."

But most parents and students at Tuesday night's meeting reminded the board that a similar policy is already in place.

According to Michael Wagner, whose daughter attends a school in the district, parents already have a say in the matter.

"The district already accommodates any individual requests when parents and students have concerns about reading materials, and finds alternate solutions," Wagner told the board. "We do not need a policy for parental restriction of reading material – it is already being done on request, and what is being proposed will be impossible to implement without broad strokes of censorship which is not appropriate in a public school system."

Parents like Wagner also argue that the books in the school library have received the approval of the American Library Association (ALB) so that students have access to a wide variety of reading material.

The school district's proposed measure stems from an incident that occurred at the end of the last school year when a male student chose to partake in an extracurricular literature circle led by a female librarian at Appoquinimink High School. The group, made up of mostly female students, was reading "Identical" by Ellen Hopkins. The book deals with the story of a child who was sexually abused by her father.

According to Jim Chevalier, the senior pastor at Friendship Baptist Church in Glasgow, his son – the only male student in the literature circle – brought the book home and expressed concern with its content. Soon after, Chevalier began circulating a petition to require the school district to adopt a process for ensuring that all material was age appropriate.

"The book had explicit sexual content in it," Chevalier told the board. "...[This] runs counter with the values that I as a parent spouse. It's nice to see your concern as a board with protecting the rights and values of me as a parent and with regard with the content and accessibility of items to minors. I'm very pleased that you are taking this on."

Other parents however, warned the school district with agreeing to a measure that could take away a student's ability to learn about issues they may be dealing with and seek help.

"If even one student sees themselves in a book with difficult subject matter – make no mistake folks, there are children in our community who are victims of abuse, of incest. There are children cutting themselves," said Maria Poole. "And, these books are not a roadmap to that. These books allow a child to see themselves and not be put in a corner and be marginalized and perhaps reach out and get the help that they need."

Gruver told the board that he did not need their vote in order to adopt the measure he had proposed. But board member Richard Forsten said that the matter needed a chance for more public input before it is finalized. He also said that the draft measure would be available to the public on Dec. 10 on the district's website.



PHOTO / DOLORES M. BERNAL

Michael Wagner spoke at the Appoquinimink School Board of Education meeting on Dec. 9 to express his concern with the school districts' proposed measure to tighten student access to reading material.

# Also at the Dec. 9 Appoquinimink School Board of Education meeting

The Appoquinimink School Board said that the contract extension for Superintendent Matthew Burrows they had voted on at the Nov. 18 meeting had left out a \$4,000 cap for moving expenses and a raise. The error had been unintentional, said Richard Forsten.

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