

Wednesday, August 3 is the last day for public comment on this proposed Board of Education Policy, at <https://townhall.virginia.gov/L/GDocForum.cfm?GDocForumID=1881>.

I oppose the policy proposed by the Virginia Department of Education that would notify parents of any sexually explicit materials assigned in their child's class. This policy is not needed as parents already are able to review their child's curriculum and serve on advisory boards for their public school system, and this additional notification policy for "sexually explicit material" has a number of detrimental impacts that should be considered.

The true intent and impact of Senate Bill 656 is classroom censorship. The term "sexually explicit content" is an extremely broad term that can be used by anyone, based on their personal opinion, to exclude information from a classroom. This will impact all students in the class, not just the child whose parent objects to the information. Censorship would deprive students in Virginia of their freedom of thought and expression, which is foundational in a free nation. For students to grow and learn they must be exposed to new ideas and various viewpoints, bettering their understanding of self and the world in which we live.

Teachers and librarians will fear or be confused over what qualifies as "sexually explicit content." If this policy goes into effect, the law could allow a scene or a paragraph from classic media or literary works to be taken out of context and used by some as a reason to label the work "sexually explicit," without considering the full context or the benefits students can receive from the work. Labeling books as having "sexually explicit content" with no context or understanding of the materials severely limits a teachers' ability to present varied experiences and perspectives. This censorship can deprive Virginia's students from benefiting from the history of humanity presented through art.

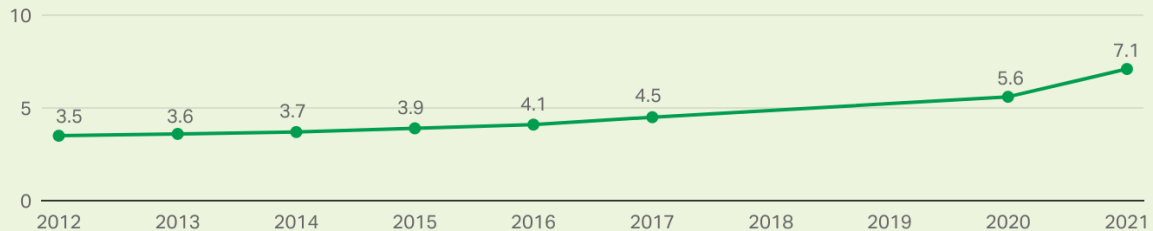
More importantly, "Sexually explicit content", as defined in the Virginia code, can include everything from teaching LGBTQ+ history to excluding the discussion of LGBTQ+ families in family life classes. This is absolutely unacceptable and is the same as Florida's discriminatory bill restricting the mention of homosexuality.

Almost every family has members that are LGBTQ. Gallup found that more than 7% of U.S. adults identify as something other than straight or heterosexual and this percentage has steadily increased since Gallup first measured LGBT identification in 2012. (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/332522/percentage-americans-lgbt.aspx>). This means that at least one student in 14 would be deprived of information at school that would allow their family to be treated as normal.

Americans' Self-Identification as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Something Other Than Heterosexual

Which of the following do you consider yourself to be? You can select as many as apply. Straight or heterosexual; Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transgender

— % Identify as LGBT



--Respondents who volunteer another identity (e.g., queer, same-gender-loving; pansexual) are recorded as "Other LGBT" by interviewers. These responses are included in the LGBT estimate.

--Data not collected in 2018 and 2019.

--2012-2013 wording: Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?

GALLUP

We all want the best for our children, including the best education. For the most effective education, students must be exposed to different people and cultures to broaden their perspective and better understand their community, country and the world in which they live. More, not less information is needed to encourage critical thinking and to help students develop the skills they need to lead good and meaningful lives, however they personally want to define it as they mature. If we are going to build a tolerant and inclusive society where diversity is embraced and all are included, we cannot censor teachers and librarians from using what is being labeled as “sexually explicit content.”

Some might ask “shouldn’t parents have a choice in what their children are taught?” There are already plenty of opportunities for parents in Virginia to know their child’s curriculum and to opt their child out of any lessons they desire. We do not need a specific additional carve out for “sexually explicit material.”