

New law puts Iowa school librarians at risk

By Ryan Brown

Iowa school librarians will be at risk this school year due to a new law that will require all library books to be age-appropriate without any depictions of sex acts. The law also prohibits any instruction related to gender identity and sexual orientation through sixth grade.

Sam Helmick, president of the Iowa Library Association (ILA), says that school librarians will be caught in a very tough position because they will need to uphold the standards of the law. However, Helmick feels that duty will conflict with students' First Amendment rights to have access to young adult literature they want to read.

“You’re caught between keeping your job and not making yourself liable to a litigation suit,” said Helmick.

Helmick says the law could lead to censorship of signature classics such as Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

“I think once you open the door to allowing censorship, then it becomes a hammer looking for a nail,” Helmick explained, stating that now even books such as the graphic novel *Maus* that address the Holocaust are being challenged.

Helmick does feel that the term age-appropriate in the new law is a little vague “because we [library professionals and literacy experts] understand that reading comprehension is based on interests, not age. Once you find that gateway book that interests a small child, whether it's a graphic novel, or a short fiction or non-fiction about tractors, that engagement is really what produces the interest and the practice to read,

and therefore your literacy.”

Helmick also sees issues with the definition of a sex act in the new law.

“I need to have a sex act a little bit more defined for me, specifically with other language in the bill that talks about orientation training in general,” Helmick explained. “Are we talking about mom and dad have a little kiddo? The depiction of having a kiddo obviously suggests a sexual act and a heterosexual environment and therefore could be interpreted as an age-inappropriate depiction. What do we mean by this?”

Although it is unclear why that portion of the law was written so vaguely, Helmick stated that it could have been an accident.

“There is a part of me that wants to generously suggest that because library workers, English professors, and teachers were not consulted, that maybe the vagueness of the bill was just an unintended consequence of not researching properly and inviting more people to the table,” Helmick stated.

The ILA, in conjunction with the Iowa Association of School Librarians, sent out a letter to schools across the state, seeking clear directives from the Iowa Department of Education and school administrators. These questions included how school libraries such as Durant’s that have all K-12 materials available in a one-room library will be separated to standard, and if classic literature that is part of Advanced Placement curriculum will now be illegal for violating the age-appropriate standards.

The law stipulates punishments for school librarians who violate the law. After a

first violation, a written warning will be given. On a subsequent violation, the librarian could face a disciplinary hearing if the law was “knowingly violated.”

If school librarians fear for their job, they may decide out of caution to take controversial books off of the shelf. As a student, this worries me due to the fact that many of the most popular young adult titles may be challenged for the wrong reasons.

The law additionally requires that the identity remain hidden of a parent or guardian who requests the removal of a book or other educational material.

I question why a librarian could be subject to a disciplinary hearing; however, the identity of a parent who challenged a book would be kept anonymous. This seems to violate the spirit of the Sixth Amendment, where accused criminals are allowed to face their accuser. The librarian will never get to face challengers to see what their true motives are for wanting a book banned.

I also fear that certain books will be nitpicked by parents as violating the law, when in reality, these books contain controversial themes dealing with race, gender discrimination, and sexual orientation.

Helmick believes that a “significant amount” of classic literature in Iowa high school curriculums could be violating the new law.

Durant High School has two classic dystopian novels in its curriculum, *1984* and *Brave New World*, where authoritarian governments control the sexual activity of their citizens and use it as a weapon to remain in power. Helmick believes both novels could be subject to challenges under the new law.



According to Helmick, caregivers, teachers, authors, students, and school boards played a prescribed and procedural role in the final say on what books were in their school libraries.

Now, the new law opens up the possibility to circumvent that right and responsibility to the state as parents could bypass a school board decision by appealing to broader governance at the level of the Department of Education.

“I think we’ve seen that in other school districts, and while we were able to rely upon the revision process according to the different Iowa school board policies, kicking this up to the state now puts that a little more in jeopardy,” Helmick stated.

“Because now we’re no longer allowing parents to decide whether their students read *Brave New World*, we’re allowing the governor’s office, or hopefully the Department of Ed.”

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things were then, there’s a very high probability that history will repeat itself.”

Peel said he doesn’t think anyone should feel guilty or responsible for past events such as slavery.

“I haven’t had any part in owning a slave or discriminating against anyone because of their race, so I shouldn’t feel obligated to feel guilty or responsible,” he said.

“Nobody should feel guilty or responsible for slavery just because of their race. Just because I’m white doesn’t mean I should feel guilty or responsible for slavery. I can sympathize for the victims of slavery, but I definitely don’t feel guilty or responsible.”

The slideshow also states that

teachers must do the following under HF 802:

- Not teach that one race or sex is inherently superior to another
- Tie racism, sexism, or oppression to specific instances, instead of applying them to an entire race or sex
- Not discriminate against individuals based on their race or sex
- Teach students to treat each other as individuals, rather than members of a race or sex
- Teach that an individual’s character is defined by their actions, not their race or sex

Students are allowed to discuss such divisive topics based on their first

amendment rights, the slideshow says, and adds, “A teacher may respond to questions regarding divisive concepts raised by students, even though those concepts may not be taught or advocated.”

However, high school social studies teacher Mr. Daniel Knipfel said this particular scenario could feel like a no-win situation for the teachers.

“I am a ‘there-are-two-sides-to-every-coin’ kind of teacher, and I feel the most healthy discussions always get multiple perspectives,” he said.

“That’s how people come up with the best decisions. From those open discussions, can a student come to their own conclusion, or be ‘taught’ something the

law prohibits? That’s the question I have regarding the law. I can’t control how students filter information.”

Mr. Knipfel said students are influenced by many things outside of school as well.

“My job is to facilitate healthy conversations using facts and let them make their own opinions from that knowledge,” he said.

According to the slideshow, educators can not grade students on their thoughts or opinions about the divisive concepts. Instead, teachers must grade students “on how clearly they articulate their thoughts.”

These concepts also come with more in-depth guidelines. According to the slideshow, HF 802 can not be used to “inhibit or violate the first amendment rights of students or staff, or undermine a school district’s duty to protect intellectual freedom and free expression.” HF 802 also does not prevent “a school district from promoting racial, cultural, ethnic, intellectual, or academic diversity or inclusiveness.”

The slideshow does presents different scenarios that a teacher might encounter.

One scenario poses two questions, “Can a language arts teacher use a novel that has potentially divisive themes (e.g. *To Kill a Mockingbird*), even if approved by local school board? Must the teacher ignore the themes of racism in the novel?”

According to the slideshow, the material is allowed, and the teacher must allow for robust discussion. Yet the slideshow stipulates, “If the novel advocates for a certain viewpoint, provide reading with counterpoints.”

However, it is not clear what a possible counterpoint is to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the story of a black man wrongly convicted and imprisoned for the rape of a white woman.

The slideshow also states it is “likely problematic” for teachers to encourage students to ask them questions about the divisive concepts covered in the law.



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Junior Brady Daufeldt has been playing in the high school band for two years. The instrument Daufeldt plays is the tuba, and he enjoys playing it because it is a unique instrument. Daufeldt also plays in the marching band and enjoys having Mr. Kevin Mundt as a band instructor.



Daufeldt