

Florida School District Removes Dictionaries from Libraries, Citing Law Championed by DeSantis

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The Escambia County School District, located in the Florida panhandle, has removed several dictionaries from its library shelves over concerns that making the dictionaries available to students would violate Florida law. The American Heritage Children's Dictionary, Webster's Dictionary for Students, and Merriam-Webster's Elementary Dictionary are among [more than 2800 books](#) that have been pulled from Escambia County school libraries and placed into storage. The Escambia County School District says these texts may violate HB 1069, a bill [signed into law](#) by Governor Ron DeSantis (R) in May 2023.

HB 1069 gives residents the right to demand the removal of any library book that "[depicts or describes sexual conduct](#)," as defined under [Florida law](#), whether or not the book is pornographic. Rather than considering complaints, the Escambia County School Board [adopted an emergency rule](#) last June that required the district's librarians to conduct a review of all library books and remove titles that may violate HB 1069.

Each school in Escambia County has thousands of titles. As a result, many school libraries were [closed](#) at the beginning of the school year pending the completion of the review.

At the completion of that process, more than [2800 books](#) were removed from libraries. (This includes, in some cases, multiple copies of the same book.) These books are being reviewed again by the school district. But that process is proceeding extremely slowly. According to a list maintained by the Escambia County School District, fewer than [100 texts](#) have gone through the final review process. Many of these books remain unavailable to students absent a parental "opt-in."

The dictionaries, according to the school district's data, remain locked away. Their exclusion demonstrates the preposterously broad language of HB 1069. Dictionaries do contain

descriptions of “sexual conduct.” Merriam-Webster, for example, defines [sex](#) as a “sexual union involving penetration of the vagina by the penis” or “intercourse (such as anal or oral intercourse) that does not involve penetration of the vagina by the penis.” But the idea that we need to exclude dictionaries from schools to protect children defies all logic.

District staff responsible for the review at each school were given a checklist to determine whether a book should be withheld from students. The checklist suggests reviewers consult “Book Looks,” [a right-wing website](#) relied on by Moms for Liberty and other groups to justify the banning of books from school libraries. It was created by “[Moms For Liberty member Emily Maikisch](#),” according to public records reviewed by Book Riot.

The Florida Freedom to Read Project (FFRP) obtained a copy of the checklist from the school district, which FFRP provided to Popular Information.

Book Review Checklist for HB 1069

Use this checklist to review your Adult and Young Adult titles for sexual conduct as defined in HB 1069, 847.001(19): “Sexual conduct” means actual or simulated sexual intercourse, deviate sexual intercourse, sexual bestiality, masturbation, or sadomasochistic abuse; actual or simulated lewd exhibition of the genitals; actual physical contact with a person’s clothed or unclothed genitals, pubic area, buttocks, or, if such person is a female, breast with the intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of either party; or any act or conduct which constitutes sexual battery or simulates that sexual battery is being or will be committed. A mother’s breastfeeding of her baby does not under any circumstance constitute “sexual conduct.”

- ☐ Identify Adult and Young Adult titles through a Titlewave Analysis report
- ☐ Look the book over, read jacket summary
- ☐ Check CommonSense Media
 - ☐ Read through “Parents Need to Know”
 - ☐ Check Sex, Romance, & Nudity
 - ☐ Check Violence & Scariness
- ☐ Check Book Looks website (optional) to see if book listed: review passages for sexual conduct
- ☐ Check Google Book Review
 - ☐ Search for terms related to sexual conduct
- ☐ Check Amazon, Good Reads, or other crowd sourced book review source:

Along with dictionaries, the [books removed](#) from Escambia County school libraries as a result of this process include eight different encyclopedias, two thesauruses, and five editions of *The Guinness Book of World Records*. Biographies of Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Oprah Winfrey, Nicki Minaj, and Thurgood Marshall are also locked in storage.

Classic texts like Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, *The Adventures and the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, and Agatha Christie’s *Death on the Nile* are no longer available to Escambia County students. Twenty-three novels by Stephen King have been removed. The dragnet has also swept up books popular with the political right including *Atlas Shrugged* and two books by conservative pundit Bill O’Reilly.

The reality in Escambia County serves as a rejoinder to DeSantis, who has described concerns about book removals as a “[leftist activist hoax](#)” and a “false political narrative.”

At the same event, Florida Department of Education Commissioner Manny Diaz [argued](#) “[r]emoving clear instances of pornography and sexually explicit materials, often within arms reach of our youngest kids, is not book banning.” How would Diaz describe removing the dictionary?

DeSantis justified his statements by claiming that no school district in Florida had removed more than 19 books. At the time, [148 books](#) had been removed in Escambia County as part of the challenge process. Now, in part due to DeSantis signing HB 1069, more than ten times that many books have been taken off the shelves in Escambia County. And Escambia County is not an anomaly. Orange County, Florida, which includes Orlando, has [removed at least 678 books](#) from library shelves.

Authors and Parents Fight Back

Penguin Random House, five authors, two parents of Escambia County students, and the non-profit group PEN America [sued](#) the Escambia County School Board last May, alleging that the board’s actions violate the First Amendment. The lawsuit relates to decisions by the school board, prior to the passage of HB 1069, to permanently ban several books from Escambia schools.

The Escambia County School Board banned most of these books at the request of Vicki Baggett, a high school English teacher in the county. Baggett is responsible for hundreds of challenges in Escambia County and neighboring counties. She also [appeared](#) at the June 2023 board meeting and spoke in favor of the emergency rule.

Baggett has challenged books like *And Tango Makes Three*, the true story of two male penguins, Roy and Silo, who lived in the Central Park Zoo and raised an adopted chick. In [an interview](#) with Popular Information, Baggett said she objected to *And Tango Makes Three* because it exposes students to “alternate sexual ideologies.” Baggett said she was concerned “a second grader would read this book, and that idea would pop into the second grader’s mind... that these are two people of the same sex that love each other.”

Last year, Popular Information [reported](#) that former and current students accused Baggett of being openly homophobic in class. For example, Baggett allegedly told a tenth-grade student that her sister, who had a girlfriend, was “faking being a lesbian for attention” because “nobody’s born that way.”

More recently, Baggett was [involved in a scheme](#) that involved reporting a librarian in a neighboring county to law enforcement for failing to remove a popular young adult novel from the school library.

Although a material review committee in Escambia County voted 5-0 to reject Baggett’s challenge of *And Tango Makes Three*, the decision was overruled by the school board, which sided with Baggett. “The fascination is still on those two male penguins,” school board member David Williams said. “So I’ll be voting to remove the book from our libraries.”

The lawsuit alleges that the school board banned and restricted books “based on their disagreement with the ideas expressed in those books.” In so doing, the school board has “prescribed an orthodoxy of opinion that violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments.”

Today, there is an important hearing in the case. A federal judge will consider Escambia County’s motion to dismiss the complaint. In a brief submitted by the State of Florida in

support of Escambia, Attorney General Ashley Moody argued that the school board could ban books for any reason because the purpose of public school libraries is to “[convey the government’s message](#),” and that can be accomplished through “the removal of speech that the government disapproves.” This is a novel argument about the purpose of school libraries.

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