

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: SB-jaxselle@hcps.us, sb-rmay@hcps.us, SB-ohawkins@hcps.us, SB-rhundley@hcps.us, sb-sikenberry@hcps.us, SB-jredd@hcps.us, SB-gsutton@hcps.us

John F. Axselle III
Chair
Hanover County School Board
200 Berkley Street
Ashland, Virginia 23005-1399

Re: Remove the bible from Hanover County Public Schools

Dear Chair Axselle and School Board members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to request that the bible be removed from school libraries under the Board's new book ban policy. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 900 members in Virginia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that on June 13, the Board passed a new book ban policy, granting itself full discretion to decide whether or not to remove certain books from school libraries, and immediately moved to ban more than a dozen books, including *All Boys Aren't Blue*, *The Bluest Eye* and *This Book is Gay*.¹ We understand the new policy is aimed at "sexually explicit," "vulgar," and "obscene" content, and it gives the Board the "sole discretion" to "remove any and all materials of its choosing from the library, classroom, school building(s) and or division." We also understand that both supporters and opponents of the policy called for the Board to delay the vote and rework it to better suit teachers, students and school families.

We therefore write to request that, in keeping with your new policy and practice, you immediately ban the bible from all district schools. Most of the books you have chosen to ban so far contain material far less objectionable than found in the bible, with its insensitive writings on issues such as racism, graphic sexual references, rape, incest and sexual abuse. The Board must enforce its policy equally and cannot simply ban books based on the viewpoint expressed. If the books already banned contain too much "sexually explicit content" or "pervasive vulgarity," then so too does the bible.

In the bible, rape is not only described, but the victims are forced to marry their rapists.² One bible story tells of a prostitute who "lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses," who "longed for the lewdness of your youth, when . . . [her] bosom was

¹<https://www.wric.com/news/local-news/hanover-county/hanover-county-school-board-grants-itself-authority-to-ban-books-in-new-policy/>

² Deuteronomy 22:28–29.

caressed and your young breasts fondled.”³ This same story speaks about sex toys: you “took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them.”⁴ Another book of the bible has a character who prays, “may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love.”⁵ In yet another bible story, a future husband purchases a wife by killing 200 of her fathers’ enemies, mutilating their corpses, and bringing back their foreskins as a dowry.⁶ Another sordid and preposterous story that defames incest victims recounts the exploits of two daughters who, having just witnessed a genocide and the murder of their mother by a pyromaniacal god, supposedly got their father drunk and seduced him in order to bear his children.⁷ Yet another book describes sperm, intercourse, menstruation, homosexuality, bestiality, adultery and whores.⁸ Another depicts a holy man impaling a woman through her belly and describes in loving detail how to steal and rape virgins as war booty.⁹ Yet another tale tells how a woman has her hand cut off for touching a man’s penis.¹⁰ In other passages, women’s skirts are lifted over their face so their nakedness and shame can be exposed to all.¹¹ Another tale describes a man touching a woman’s “hole of the door” and how her “bowels were moved for him.”¹²

These and many more unpalatable and sexually explicit stories are found in the various books of the bible. Our educational association has published a brochure, *An X-Rated Book: Sex & Obscenity In the Bible*, which exposes nearly 150 bible verses displaying a “pornographic view of sex and women, lewdness, depravity and sexual violence often ordered or countenanced by the biblical deity.” It can be read for free on our website.¹³

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker has written an entire book on the evils of the bible, *GOD: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*. Chapters document “divinely” ordered genocide, infanticide and filicide, among many other atrocities, as well as the biblical deity’s racism, sexism, slavemongering and sadomasochism. An interactive companion website details all of this and more.¹⁴ These verses are one reason why FFRF makes available bible warning labels to place on hotel bibles saying, “Warning: Literal belief in this book may endanger your health and life.”¹⁵

The bible historically is doubtless the single-most weaponized piece of writing on the planet, responsible for unjust wars, genocide, anti-semitism, violent extremism, subjugation of women and pervasive racism. Throughout the Crusades, the Inquisition, the witch hunts, chattel slavery, the Holocaust, and the history of homophobia, the bible looms large. As *Born Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible*¹⁶ author Ruth Hurmence Green eloquently put it, “There was a time when religion ruled the world. It is known as the Dark Ages.”

³ Ezekiel 23:20–21.

⁴ Ezekiel 16:17.

⁵ Proverbs 5:19.

⁶ 1 Samuel 18:27.

⁷ Genesis 19.

⁸ Leviticus.

⁹ Numbers.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 25:11–12.

¹¹ Nahum 3:5.

¹² Song of Solomon 5:4.

¹³ Available at ffrf.org/component/k2/item/23733-an-x-rated-book-sex-obscenity-in-the-bible.

¹⁴ Available at unpleasant.ffrf.org/.

¹⁵ Available at ffrf.org/shop/accessories/bumper-stickers-15/bible-warning-labels-skull-crossbones-78-detail.

¹⁶ <https://shop.ffrf.org/product/born-again-skeptics-guide-to-the-bible/>

FFRF advocates, above all, for freedom of thought. We oppose the concept of banning books from school libraries. We believe that there is no true freedom of thought, conscience or even religion, unless our government and its public schools are free from religion and its control over thought. We are deeply familiar with the haunting history of censorship—from the Catholic Church’s Index Librorum Prohibitorum, to the Comstock laws, to the Nazi book burnings, the attacks on authors such as Charles Darwin and Salman Rushdie, and the murders of Bangladeshi bloggers such as Avijit Roy. Heinrich Heine famously observed, “Where they burn books, they will end in burning human beings.” History never looks kindly on book censors and burners.

We are very concerned about this new policy and the unbridled discretion you have given yourselves to control the content of materials available to district students. The best solution is to leave a diversity of viewpoints in school libraries, and trust students to explore complex topics themselves. However, so long as the Board is on a crusade to remove any books containing sexual content, the bible may not be given special treatment and it must be removed too.

The “sexually explicit” sections of the many books you have removed are mainly minor parts of books that have literary value. Reading takes time, and understanding books critically takes even more thought. Those who propose book bans target gullible audiences with selective material. They fear free inquiry and independence of thought. Much of the book banning impetus is manufactured, with pre-made lists of books and quotes circulated by self-righteous grandstanders who are hostile to critical thinking. In short, the current wave of book banning is not about protecting children, it is about discouraging thought.

We are disturbed by the Board’s new policy and the effect it will have in removing many important books from school libraries based on content taken out of context. Because you have chosen to remove “sexually explicit content” from district schools and you have set a standard for that content that clearly encompasses the sexually explicit materials contained in the bible, so long as the other books you have banned remain unavailable, you must be even-handed about your purge and immediately remove the bible as well. If you find that the vast amount of sexually explicit material in the bible does not warrant its removal from district schools, then this same lower standard must be applied to all of the books with much less objectionable content that you have already banned, and they must be returned to library shelves.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation