

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

May 11, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
ryan.walters@sde.ok.gov

Ryan Walters
State Superintendent of Public Education
Oklahoma Department of Education
Oliver Hodge Building
2500 North Lincoln Boulevard
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

Re: Your recent comments on book banning

Dear Superintendent Walters:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding your recent comments regarding what books should be made available in Oklahoma public schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

In a recent video published on May 1, you called for books with LGBTQIA+ content to be banned from Oklahoma public schools on the grounds that you believe them to be “graphic pornography” that is harmful to students, and stated that instead, public school students should be taught the Christian bible in their classes:

Oklahomans, we have a clear choice in front of us. When it comes to our schools, do we want the radical ideology in our classroom that pushes gender theory, that pushes graphic pornography in order to perform a social experiment on our kids? Or, do we want the U.S. Constitution? Do we want documents like the Federalist Papers and the Bible, so that our kids understand our history and how our government was put together — those core fundamental principles have made us the greatest country in the history of the world?¹

This statement comes in the wake of the Oklahoma Department of Education’s recent attempt to illegally ban a large number of books from the public school system — including all 190 books on the American Library Association’s Rainbow Book List, which is a curated list of books with LGBTQIA+ representation, divided by age group.² Books on this list, which you and your

¹ @ronfilipkowski, Twitter, (May 1, 2023, 3:25 PM) bit.ly/3MkxFTE

² Nuria Martinez-Keel, *New Oklahoma rules on school library books, transgender students should be void, AG says*, *The Oklahoman*, (April 4, 2023), available at

department deemed “pornographic,” include titles such as: “Forever Home: A Dog and Boy Love Story.” by Henry Cole, a book about a boy who wants to prove that he is responsible enough to adopt a dog; “Mama and Mommy and Me in the Middle.” by Nina LaCour and Kaylani Juanita, a story about a girl who is learning to cope with missing her mother while she’s away on a trip; and “Tiger Honor” by Yoon Lee, a science fiction novel based on Korean mythology about a boy who wants to become a star ship captain.³

While none of the books listed above contain the type of graphic sexual content you and your department have said you wish to protect children from, the bible, which you have determined to be necessary reading for public school children of all ages, certainly does.

In the bible, rape is not only described, but the victims are forced to marry their rapists.⁴ 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 caressed and your young breasts fondled.”⁵ 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.”⁶ Another book of the bible has a character who prays, “may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Yet another book describes sperm, intercourse, menstruation, homosexuality, bestiality, adultery and whores.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Yet another tale tells how a woman has her hand cut off for touching a man’s penis.¹² In other passages, women’s skirts are lifted over their face so their nakedness and shame can be exposed to all.¹³ Another tale describes a man touching a woman’s “hole of the door” and how her “bowels were moved for him.”¹⁴

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 &*

<https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/education/2023/04/04/oklahoma-lgbt-books-school-library-rules-ryan-waltes-gentner-drummond/70080835007/>

³ The American Library Association, *2023 Rainbow Book List*, available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/14e1HHU_8zP9aL5ZqC_ybKNxqpQAqn50H/view

⁴ Deuteronomy 22:28–29.

⁵ Ezekiel 23:20–21.

⁶ Ezekiel 16:17.

⁷ Proverbs 5:19.

⁸ 1 Samuel 18:27.

⁹ Genesis 19.

¹⁰ Leviticus.

¹¹ Numbers.

¹² Deuteronomy 25:11–12.

¹³ Nahum 3:5.

¹⁴ Song of Solomon 5:4.

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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*¹⁸ author Ruth Hurmence Green eloquently put it, “There was a time when religion ruled the world. It is known as the Dark Ages.”

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.

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 your department is interpreting Oklahoma law as requiring it to remove any books containing sexual content, the bible may not be given special treatment and under your interpretation, you must equally call for its removal.

The “inappropriate” sections of books that your department has attempted to ban are either non-existent or mainly minor parts of books that have much higher 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. The truth of the matter is that LGBTQIA+ inclusive curriculum and media representation leads to lower rates of suicide and sexually transmitted infections, as well as increased academic performance and

¹⁵ Available at ffrf.org/component/k2/item/23733-an-x-rated-book-sex-obscenity-in-the-bible.

¹⁶ Available at unpleasant.ffrf.org/.

¹⁷ Available at ffrf.org/shop/accessories/bumper-stickers-15/bible-warning-labels-skull-crossbones-78-detail.

¹⁸ <https://shop.ffrf.org/product/born-again-skeptics-guide-to-the-bible/>

positive mental health outcomes for students.¹⁹ In short, the current wave of book banning is not about protecting children, it is about discouraging thought.

We are disturbed by your recent comments and actions, and the harm it will do to Oklahoma youth. You have set a standard for inappropriate content that more than encompasses the sexually explicit materials contained in the bible. If you are going to attempt to ban LGBTQIA+ content, you must be even-handed about your purge and immediately call for the removal of the bible as well. If you find that the vast amount of sexually explicit material in the bible does not warrant its removal from Oklahoma public schools, then this same lower standard must be applied to all of the books with much less objectionable content that you have already attempted to ban.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kat D. Grant", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kat D. Grant

Equal Justice Works Fellow (sponsored by the Wm. Collins Kohler Foundation)
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹⁹ Bobby M. Bittker, *LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum as a Path to Better Public Health*, American Bar Association, (July 5, 2022) available at https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/intersection-of-lgbtq-rights-and-religious-freedom/lgbtq-inclusive-curriculum-as-a-path-to-better-public-health/