



Opportunity Through Education

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Subcommittee on Education and the Workforce
Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Chairman Bean and Ranking Member Bonamici:

My name is Megan Degenfelder and I am the elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Wyoming. I was sworn into office in January of this year. I ran for this position because I view public education as one of the most important tools in lifting people out of poverty and fulfilling the American dream. The power of public education, when it meets its fundamental purpose, is to prepare students for jobs and to be good American citizens so our communities and our country continue to grow stronger than they were before. However, this fundamental purpose becomes compromised if parents lose trust and confidence in their public schools. And that is exactly what is happening right now - due in no small part to the introduction of inappropriate, sexually explicit materials in school libraries.

I had the opportunity to campaign extensively over the course of a year to every corner of my state. Through this experience, I spoke with thousands of voters about their concerns regarding public education. At the top of this list - across all varying types of communities was fear of inappropriate curriculum and materials in schools. This trend is destroying trust and confidence in our public schools across the country.

Many Wyoming parents are working full-time jobs, sometimes multiple jobs, while also full-time parenting. Single parents are doing everything they can just to keep their heads above water. But all parents should feel peace when their child gets on that school bus or leaves the car at their public school drop off. They should trust that their child's school is going to be a productive and safe place to learn, free from undue influence.

But when I heard the stories from families and learned the source of some parents' concerns, I was alarmed. I want to share just one such story with you. I recently met a mother trying to raise her family of eight children. She was approached by her teenage daughter about a book she was assigned to read in school that was making her uncomfortable. This mother didn't want to have a knee jerk reaction and storm a school board meeting – so she decided to read the entire book for herself. What she found was startling to her. The book contained graphic sexual depictions, including oral sex and profanity. This mother is a survivor of child sexual abuse, and the book was not only triggering for her, but also made her fearful that the minors reading it could become desensitized and conditioned to think that some of the depictions they were reading were acceptable and not speak up if they were victims themselves.

She approached the teacher, asking if her daughter could skip this particular book and choose something that made her more comfortable. Almost immediately several additional students spoke up – saying they too were uncomfortable and wanted a different book to read. So, what resulted from this child and mother speaking up? The teacher became her bully – making remarks to her in front of her fellow classmates, calling her daughter a “tattle tale” and asking her “what the big deal was.” Her

daughter now begs to switch to remote learning and fears going to school, even after eventually transferring to another class. Her younger siblings will now be homeschooled, because this parent has lost trust in her public school system. All because of a book containing sexually explicit content.

Is this happening with every teacher or in every school? Of course not. We have many great teachers and leaders in public education. But there are books currently available to minor aged K-12 students and paid for by taxpayer dollars that include graphic depictions of sexually explicit acts - including drawings. I know, I didn't believe it at first either. But unfortunately, I have seen these books firsthand with my own eyes. Even mentioning the details of these books feels wildly inappropriate. However, if they are too inappropriate to discuss with you today, then I ask why they are available to our children? I have included excerpts from books that were identified in two different school districts in Wyoming, one of the most conservative states in the country, for your review. These books were made available to children below the age of sexual consent. And what is most insidious about this effort to subject them to this sexualized content at younger and younger ages - is that the titles and covers of the books are designed to appear innocent making it all the more difficult to identify age appropriateness.

Graphic imagery and erotic images - of any sexual orientation - are not only beyond the scope of the sexual education state standards, but they are also not suitable for minor children and are a complete misuse of taxpayer dollars. There are many places for such material to exist as resources for adult individuals, but a K-12 public taxpayer funded library created specifically for minors to advance their education is not the place.

It is common sense that children should not be able to access pornographic material while at school. When did protecting our children become so controversial? Why are parents required to opt-in to field trips and emergency medical care for a child but not sexually explicit materials? We need parents and families to be involved in their student's education and bought into transparent school curriculums. If parents are concerned that their child is being inappropriately influenced while they should be safe at school, then nothing else matters and we lose sight of the fundamental purpose of education.

Our schools are where we build community and foster qualities essential to an orderly, rules-based society. It doesn't matter if you are poor or rich, or what color your skin is, or any other differences - in the classroom everyone is there to learn a common set of skills and knowledge. Through extracurricular school activities like sports, we develop a sense of leadership, teamwork, fairness, and community spirit. We carry these important attributes with us into the workplace and into civic life, and we are all the better for it. Or at least that's how it's supposed to work, and how it has worked, until very recently. Too often today our public schools are places for social experimentation that serve to divide rather than unite us.

It is our goal in Wyoming to raise a new generation of leaders to preserve, protect, defend and improve upon what has made America the greatest nation on the planet. With this goal in mind, I laid out a strategic plan for my department. This included, among others, a key initiative on empowering parents around curriculum and library materials. There is absolutely no room in classrooms for distractions and

inappropriate influences when ACT scores are at a record low and the national average of students proficient or above on the national comparator exam known as NAEP are between 26% to 35%.

So how do we solve this issue? It certainly should not be up to the federal government. I respect local control in government. Education is no exception, so I respect the duly elected school board authority over books and curriculum. In fact, in Wyoming, the authority over textbooks is specifically granted by the state constitution to local school districts. Growing up with a parent who served on our local school board, I have seen firsthand that these volunteer board members need help from their constituents to deliver on the campaign promises they make. It is a serious and critical job that takes an enormous amount of time and due diligence. However, through our research we have found that many districts do not have a robust system or policy in place for library materials, therefore we need to support them from the state level.

My approach at the state level has been working with a stakeholder group to create statewide library material guidance, including sample definitions and model policy, expressly prohibiting sexually explicit material, and allowing for a transparent public process for selecting and reconsidering material. Our stakeholder committee includes voices of parents, librarians, school administrators and school board members of varying backgrounds and viewpoints. In addition to the creation of this committee, I have attended and testified at local school board meetings on this very issue, because I believe it is important for those of us in leadership positions to lend our voice to protect our children.

In closing, thank you again for this opportunity. Our public schools are under more scrutiny than ever before - and for good reason. Declining academic performance, deteriorating student discipline, political influences, and inappropriate sexualization are all real and serious problems. Again, are they happening in every school? Of course not. There are wonderful teachers and school leaders across the country doing incredible things. But are they happening enough to cause concern among parents across the country? Yes, they are, and they must be addressed so we can return our focus on the fundamental purpose of public education. But for today-we can focus on this issue at hand and hopefully start to find solutions to it. I, for one, will never stop fighting for the safety of Wyoming's children.

Thank you,



Megan Degenfelder
Wyoming State Superintendent of Public Instruction