



VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
CHARTING THE COURSE

Department of Teaching and Learning

MEMORANDUM

TO: Victoria C. Manning, School Board Member

FROM: Kipp D. Rogers, Ph.D., Chief Academic Officer

SUBJECT: Challenged Instructional Materials Findings

DATE: January 28, 2022

The purpose of this memorandum is to share the results of six book reviews that were completed by six different committees using the process outlined in Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) [Regulation 7-12.1](#), Complaints from the Public: Challenged Controversial Materials. The books were reviewed after concerns were raised over potential controversial material contained within the books. In that the request for review was made by a school board member, all school board members are copied on the findings.

The six books the committees reviewed were:

1. *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines
2. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
3. *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison
4. *Good Trouble* by Christopher Noxon
5. *Beyond Magenta* by Susan Kuklin
6. *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe

Two books, *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Bluest Eye*, are currently on the approved supplemental title list for secondary English. The other four books, *Lawn Boy*, *Good Trouble*, *Beyond Magenta*, and *Gender Queer* are located in school libraries as optional books for student check out.

The supplemental titles list is part of the secondary English curriculum. Supplemental titles are listed by grade level appropriateness, and teachers have a choice as to which novels best align with skills and standards that are being taught. Any novels used with all students within the classroom must come from this approved list.

A Lesson Before Dying is listed as an approved text for English 11, Honors English 11, and Advanced Placement Language and Composition. *The Bluest Eye* is listed as an approved text for Advanced Placement Literature and Composition, a grade 12 course. *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Bluest Eye* are also available in high school libraries.

Central support staff worked with school-based staff to identify a diverse group of students, parents, and staff to serve on the six committees. There was one committee for each book. As a result, there was some overlap in central support staff with the expertise to lead the discussions as a result of needing to have six committees operating simultaneously. The books were ordered and distributed to committee members along with six discussion questions that were aligned to VBCPS [Policy 6-61](#), Instructional Materials Selection. Committee members were asked to respond to the six questions after reading the book they were provided.

All committees met virtually to discuss the assigned book and each committee reached unanimous consensus for recommendations made to the Chief Academic Officer. Below is a summary of the six book review recommendations made by the committees.

***A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines**

The review committee consisted of a high school teacher, high school parent, high school Library Media Specialist (LMS), and a Department of Teaching and Learning (DTAL) coordinator. Members of this committee reported reading the book, reviewing database articles, literature reviews and online articles to learn more about others viewpoints on the text.

Key points considered as part of the recommendation:

- The novel includes themes such as racism, classism, self-discovery, and forgiveness, which the committee members stated are important for students to read about.
- Students are exposed to viewpoints beyond their own.
- The high school teacher and LMS on this committee shared multiple examples of students connecting with and remembering this book beyond use in the classroom.
- The novel offers clear interdisciplinary connections in social studies and English.
- The novel reaches a large audience as many people can see themselves and the history of our country within the novel.

The committee recommends *A Lesson Before Dying* continue to be available for students as a supplementary title in high school and in high school libraries.

***The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison**

The review committee consisted of a high school LMS, a high school teacher, a high school parent, a DTAL coordinator, and two students from two different high schools. Members of this committee reported reviewing information about this book on commonsensemedia.org in addition to reading the book.

Key points considered as part of the recommendation:

- The book allows for diverse perspectives that are not often encountered by students, specifically Black female voices.
- The book is of literary merit with a variety of themes, depth of characterization, and elements of narration crafted by the author in a manner in which the audience can interpret meaning on multiple levels.
- The book tackles many social issues: racism, colorism, standards of beauty, mental health, community role in victimization, sexual assault on women and children, etc.

- The review committee acknowledged the difficult scenes of rape/incest, but believed through teacher guidance and content forecasting, the difficult scenes did not supersede the message and purpose of the book.
- The College Board references this novel for the Question three Essay- Free Response on the Advanced Placement exam.

The committee recommends *The Bluest Eye* continue to be available for students as a supplementary title in high schools and in high school libraries.

Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison

The review committee consisted of a high school student, a high school teacher, a parent of a high school student, a high school LMS, and a middle school Literacy Coach. Members of the committee reported reading the book, an article about the author, the library bill of rights, and the American Library Association’s Student’s Right to Read.

Key points considered as part of the recommendation:

- The novel supports economics, sociology, and advanced language arts curriculums.
- The challenged language used in the text is not reflective of how and what the main character acts and feels, and it does not distract from the literary merit of the novel.
- Members of the committee appreciated the way the book captured the twenty-two-year-old protagonist reflecting on an incident that occurred when he was a child with another boy who was of the same age.
- Committee members shared that after reading the book in its entirety, they did not realize that the incident described in the book was the reason the book was reported.
- The parent on the committee stated: *“Not only will students be able to grow with the main character as he finds himself, they will also learn to appreciate the things they have, and maybe want to improve the world for others and make a difference.”*
- A staff member stated, *“The fact that this is written as an introspective journal provides an enormous amount of literary merit. For students that often don’t find themselves reflected in literature commonly used as instructional texts, they can connect with the main character as he finds himself and experiences the same things many young people do growing up.”*

The committee recommends *Lawn Boy* continue to be available as an optional book of choice in the library for students in high school.

Good Trouble by Christopher Noxon

The review committee consisted of a middle school teacher, two DTAL coordinators, a high school parent, and a high school student. Members of the committee reported reading the book and reviewing a positive review of the book that was posted on social media.

Key points considered as part of the recommendation:

- With the exception of the author’s introduction on pages 10-14 and page 23, the majority of the book is not political.

- The committee found the book incredibly compelling, especially the parts about people who were ordinary citizens doing extraordinary things.
- The author met with people who were still alive and who participated in the Civil Rights Movement.
- The book talks about peaceful protests and students can relate to these stories and ideas, and can benefit from learning about them.

The committee recommends *Good Trouble* continue to be available as an optional choice in the library for students in middle school and high school.

***Beyond Magenta* by Susan Kuklin**

The review committee consisted of a DTAL coordinator, middle school LMS, middle school literacy coach, a high school student, and a parent of a high school student. Members of this committee read the book and did not use any additional resources to make their decision.

Key points considered as part of the recommendation:

- The book includes six personal and relatable stories of different individuals sharing their experiences as transgender persons in society.
- The book represents a diverse population and was found to be a profound text that teaches empathy.
- The parent on this committee stated, “*The overall message of the book outweighs any questionable material.*”
- The book shares relatable information for transgender students or students struggling with identity.
- The committee shared students’ needs to see themselves in literature, and this text represents an often-marginalized group of people.
- The parent noted that she wanted her own children to read this book.
- The committee also felt many students at this age struggle with identity and that this text could, in fact, save a life.

The committee recommends *Beyond Magenta* continue to be available as an optional choice available in the library for students in high school.

***Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe**

The review committee consisted of a high school student, a high school teacher, a parent of a high school student, a high school Library Media Specialist (LMS), a coordinator from the Department of Teaching and Learning (DTAL), and a Literacy Coach. Members of the committee read the book and reviewed articles about the book.

Key points considered as part of the recommendation:

- The graphic novel style allows for a visual representation of the author’s thoughts/feelings in a way that simple text would not convey.

- Students will see that the protagonist is experiencing many of the things they do – growing up, feeling awkward in a variety of situations, following the path of education that is laid out for them, and deep-diving on subjects that interest them.
- One committee member did not initially recommend keeping the book in high school libraries as a result of objections to graphic depictions in the novel. After the high school student spoke about the benefits of the book helping students who struggle with self-identity, the committee member agreed to vote to keep the book in the library.
- The student noted that the book is a memoir of someone’s life and not a fictitious story.
- The parent was quoted saying, *“For high school level students, this is a great fit. The images are not gratuitous or created in a way that less mature students would use an excuse to poke fun of or laugh at. Growing up is such a confusing time, I think it’s important to have books like this available for students to relate to.”*

The committee recommends *Gender Queer* continue to be made available in the library for students as an optional book of choice for students in high school.

The Chief Academic Officer reviewed each committee recommendation, read each of the six books, discussed findings with committee chairpersons, and discussed each committee finding with the Superintendent. After discussing and reviewing each of the six books, the Chief Academic Officer and Superintendent concur with all committee recommendations.

The Chief Academic Officer and Superintendent had concerns about some of the graphic depictions in the book *Gender Queer*, however, the concerns did not warrant removal of the book from school libraries for student voluntary checkout. The rationale for keeping *Gender Queer* in circulation for voluntary checkout was:

- The library book was secured by schools following the criteria outlined in VBCPS Policy 6-61.
- The book already exists in some high school libraries as a choice option for students to checkout.
- A committee reviewed the book and recommended keeping it as an option for voluntary checkout for high school students.
- Removing the book from circulation would be subject to review under the *Island Trees School District v. Pico* (1982) case that speaks to the First Amendment limiting removal of books by school officials from school libraries because of their content.

Per [Regulation 7-12.1](#), should further action be desired, please submit a request in writing to Mrs. Carolyn Rye, School Board Chair, within five days of receipt of these findings. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Kipp Rogers, at kipp.rogers@vbschools.com. Thank you.

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cc: School Board Members
 Aaron C. Spence, Ed.D., Superintendent
 Donald E. Robertson, Jr., Ph.D., Chief of Staff