

GUEST COMMENTARY

Book banning — no, age appropriate — yes

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

After reviewing the content provided as examples by Rep. John Wills, I determined that it was too graphic to produce in our news pages. While we appreciate all viewpoints, we have experience in knowing what a large segment of our readership will deem to be acceptable. That said, we do believe people should have access to what our state representative is discussing. So, if one wants to see that content, it will be available as a stand-alone column under the Opinion section of our website. This means there will be far less incidental contact with the explicit nature of the content. The online column will carry warnings that it includes graphic content. Our role as community newspaper managers is to provide the community with information, and we will honor that commitment — as we do in reporting content from trials, arrests, events, etc., that is often deemed graphic or disturbing — without committing all of the details to newsprint. Should you have questions, contact me.

— BRAD HICKS, PUBLISHER, PUBLISHER@SPENCERDAILYREPORTER.COM

Many people have been emailing me, calling me and contacting me regarding book banning. First off, I am 100 percent not in favor of banning any books, no matter the subject. Books, to me, are that important, even if what they say is not something I like. When it comes to our public schools, however, we do have a responsibility to make sure that there is age appropriate and parent-approved materials in our classrooms that help our children become the best educated to take on the challenges of the future.

I will tell you that I am not in favor of banning any book, once again. I will remind you that a big push a few years ago by the other side of the political spectrum than mine, was to ban “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “Huckleberry Finn” among others, many of these were books that I view as formative in my growing up. These books were required material in my high school, and today some are calling for them to be banned. I say no. Those who say to ban these books have their reasons, I’m sure.

Recently the Government Oversight Committee of the Iowa House brought five Iowa moms to share their experiences in challenging age-inappropriate books in their children’s library or curriculum. During the committee meeting the mom’s shared explicit sexual content, disturbing accounts of violent sexual assault and rape and pedophilia.

As I go door to door to talk with parents, the common theme is not that they want books banned — parents want the knowledge of what their child is exposed to in school. Parents want a say in the raising of their own children. It would be one thing if we were talking about a few swear words or romantic scenes, but we are talking about content that is pornographic in nature.

I’m going to share an example in a bit but want to give clear warning that the material is explicit.

If you are skeptical or doubt what I am saying look the material up yourselves. Some of these books have images which I will not share. To put it in perspective, television reporters were present at the Oversight Committee recently and one of the reporters said, exasperated, “I can’t put that stuff on TV.” If it can’t go on TV, then why should it go directly to our children?

In the examples that follow, all three are found in school districts all across Iowa.

“Let’s Talk About It” is a graphic novel described as “The Teens Guide to Sex, Relationships and Being a Human.” The book contains sexually explicit

illustrations with instructions, tips and suggestions on how to perform various sex acts along with masturbation. The book also suggests safe ways to consume porn.

“Gender Queer” is a graphic novel about gender identity and sexual orientation written to relate to others who are struggling with gender identity. The book explores the use of pronouns and hormone-blocking therapies. It contains graphic illustrations of oral sex.

“Push” is described by Booklooks.org as a “heavily sexually abused teenager’s life circumstances change when a new mentor teaches her to read.” The book contains detailed and disturbing instances of incest and sexual molestation.

What are we talking about anyway? I am going to go out on a limb with a fairly moderate piece that is in these books. Below is an excerpt from the book “Push” that I mentioned above. It is very explicit but not the worst example that could have been found. I debated about sharing this because I know the newspapers will not publish it, but why? If it is good enough for the schools, isn’t it good enough for the papers? Shouldn’t parents have the right to decide if their children read the material below?

Again, we are not talking about banning books, but we are talking about ensuring sexually explicit materials are age appropriate and not able to be viewed without parents knowing about it and their consent. Our system to review this type of material is just not working and it needs to be fixed. You would assume that parents might be able to remove an offensive book or ensure their child needs permission to get it should be easy, right? It isn’t easy. The process to challenge a book is a bureaucratic nightmare and most parents can’t navigate the challenges to get through it.

I’ve been told this isn’t really a big problem anyway, so why waste the state and school’s resources on it? Recently we did a search of 51 schools for these explicit books that really do not have a lot of educational worth and found that all 51 schools in Iowa that were searched have some of them. Some schools had as many as 71 books that we searched for that deal with underage sexual encounters, LGBTQ encounters and other sexual encounters. To make an example for House District 10, because I have been told that this isn’t an issue in conservative northwest Iowa, the Spirit Lake School District has 12 of the books like the one I will have an excerpt from below. It certainly is a problem in northwest Iowa that I seek to fix.



John Wills
State Rep.

EDITOR’S NOTE

The Dickinson County News reached out to Spirit Lake Schools after receiving state Rep. John Wills’ newsletter the afternoon of Feb. 16. The school district was offered a chance to respond or otherwise comment on Wills’ claims, and comment was received from the district Feb. 21. Prior to the district returning comment to the newspaper, Wills authored a second newsletter, which was received by the Dickinson County News on Feb. 18. That supplementary newsletter appears below.

Wow, I did not think that one through! I feel I must apologize for throwing Spirit Lake School District “under the school bus” on Thursday with my newsletter titled “Banning books — no, age appropriate — yes.”

When I am doing my weekly newsletter, I try to limit the number of words, first, so that you will read it and second, to be respectful of newspapers who publish my newsletter and often have space concerns.

In the data that I cited, there were 51 school districts in the state who were investigated as to having age inappropriate content in books. The closest school district on that list was Spirit Lake Schools, which I feel is a wonderful school and which I feel does a great job. I did not mean to cause the school district a problem, only to say that no school district is safe from this problem.

I honestly believe that a vast number of schools

have simply made a mistake in putting these books on the shelf. Schools like Spirit Lake, who have 12 books, probably didn’t even know the content of the books that were in the study. However, there are schools in Iowa that have 71 of these books on their shelf. I don’t think it possible that those school districts don’t know they have this content on their shelves.

In addition, in talking with Spirit Lake Schools, I understand that, by the time my newsletter came out, a majority of these books were already not available to children. So, to Spirit Lake Schools, I am sorry for putting you into a position that caused you extra headaches.

The school didn’t ask me to say I am sorry, but it is the right thing to do. I am sorry! It was my intent to shine the light on this issue because many simply do not know how severe it is and to say it can happen in any school district.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

SPIRIT LAKE SCHOOLS RESPONDS TO WILLS’ STATEMENTS

After reviewing both of Rep. John Wills’ statements regarding library materials, we understand his intention was to shed light on the issue of age-appropriate content in school libraries and to share that he felt no district, no matter how educationally sound, is exempt from this topic. We appreciate Wills clarifying his intent and apologizing for any unintended issues caused to the district. In addressing the content of library books, the district is conscientious about the material which is placed on the shelves and available to students. This is an ever-changing topic and list, which we realize is also delicate as there are differing opinions and preferences among all stakeholders. Our district will be diligent in the continual monitoring, evaluating and updating as necessary with library materials. This situation has prompted further discussion regarding books, our library and the potential to label books and/or have parent permission. It is our responsibility to make sure content is age appropriate and educational in nature.

— SPIRIT LAKE SUPERINTENDENT DR. DAVID SMITH ON BEHALF OF THE SPIRIT LAKE SCHOOL DISTRICT

FROM THE EDITOR

WELL, WE DID AND WE DIDN’T

You likely don’t know it dear reader, but there was a good bit of behind-the-scenes hubbub after state Rep. John Wills sent out his Feb. 16 newsletter. I’m sure many dedicated readers already know those newsletters often appear as columns on the opinion page of the Dickinson County News — because we feel it’s important our readers know what their legislators are saying. And Rep. Wills definitely had some things to say this week as he discussed school library books which may contain explicit content.

Now, believe it or not, the portion of Rep. Wills’ column which gave me the most pause wasn’t the excerpt from the novel “Push” he chose to quote. Rather it was the few sentences that came before that.

“I debated about sharing this because I know the newspapers will not publish it, but why?” Wills wrote. “If it is good enough for the schools, isn’t it good enough for the papers?”

There’s nothing wrong with asking a question of course — hard for a person whose work revolves around asking questions to say otherwise — questions spur discussion. And, putting aside the major differences between running a newspaper and running a library, the claim that, “I know the newspapers will not publish it,” presented us with an unusual situation — almost a paradox.

Whether the paper omitted the excerpt or included it, readers could interpret the newspaper’s decision as an official position on the broader topic and as an attempt to exert influence over Wills’ sharing of his views with the community. To put it another way, striking the passage from print might seem like we’re agreeing with or even supporting Rep. Wills’ position, while taking the passage to press — dirty words and all — look like we’re countering or even outright opposing Rep. Wills’ point.

Neither would have been true. As I said before, the whole point of printing legislative columns is so our readers know what their lawmakers are saying. I’ve corrected punctuation and capitalization errors for various elected officials before press, but this was something entirely different. And taking either of the obvious options — keeping the excerpt in or out — would have been counter productive in some way to the opinion page’s purpose.



Seth Boyes
News Editor

So we took a third option and didn’t quite do either — not really — in an attempt to land somewhere in the middle.

As you’ll note elsewhere on this week’s opinion page, the excerpt in question was omitted in hard copy only, but it was printed in full online.

One newspaper, two mediums — we published it and yet we didn’t.

Our publisher Brad Hicks will fill you in a bit more at the top of Wills’ column if you’re interested.

But our commitment to providing fair and balanced comment on the topic didn’t end there.

Rep. Wills made a claim — about 20 little words — telling constituents across Iowa House District 10 that Spirit Lake Schools had about a dozen books he’s concerned about.

Somewhat ironically, it was almost a year ago that we at the DCN discussed what to do in almost this exact hypothetical situation. We generally agreed that if someone were to submit something like a Letter to the Editor taking issue with a controversial book in a local library, the responsible thing to do as a newspaper would be to at least call the library and confirm that book is indeed in the collection before we print anything based on that premise.

Obviously, we didn’t foresee the someone in that scenario being a state lawmaker, but we held to the standard nonetheless — we reached out to Spirit Lake Schools and invited the district to comment. It took a few days to hear back — not an uncommon thing with touchy subjects — and, in the meantime, Rep. Wills sent out an update — a bit more on the uncommon side — which you can see elsewhere on this page.

Now, dear reader, my point in telling you all of this isn’t to just pop the hood and let you see all the moving parts in a situation like this — scratch that ... that’s exactly the point.

You ought to know your local newspaper is doing its best to be fair and balanced for your benefit. Sometimes people don’t want to talk when we reach out, and sometimes questions go unanswered, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t being asked. And they’re being asked so you — our community — can have the most complete picture possible.

And that applies even here on page four.

GUEST COMMENTARY

APPROACHING FUNNEL WEEK

This week the Senate was hard at work trying to get everything in order before the first “Funnel Week” arrives, coming up during first part of March. By this time, all Senate policy bills must be voted out of a standing committee to be placed on the calendar for upcoming floor debate. Before a bill is able to be voted on in a regular standing committee like Judiciary, the process starts with a subcommittee, where the bill is voted on to move forward or be halted.

As chair of a subcommittee, we gather information necessary to make the decision to move the bill to the standing committee or not. This week we advanced out of subcommittee(s):

- SSB 1102, a Commerce bill to modernize the Iowa Division of Banking’s oversight of money transmissions
- SF 140, a Judiciary bill regarding early termination rights of tenants who are victims of certain crimes such as domestic abuse and other violent acts
- SF 187, in Health & Human Services, permits an adopted person who is at least 18 years old to apply to the state registrar to add an omitted biological parent through amendment of their original birth certificate. There are safeguards to do



Dave Rowley
State Senator

this, and the stories I have heard are touching.

On Monday I had an hour-long meeting with Iowa Medicaid Director Elizabeth Matney to discuss the pressures our rural Iowa nursing homes are experiencing. We are seeing some homes closing due to financial struggles, lack of workforce and fluctuations in resident population. It was a good discussion, and she shared some additional funding is coming to help address these problems. I also recommended some solutions I gathered from our northwest Iowa Nursing Home administrators.

I believe this discussion was productive, and I do plan to follow up with Director Matney. To those administrators from Forest City, Spencer, Milford, Spirit Lake and Sanborn, I appreciate the information you’ve shared with me and thank you and all nursing home facilities for the services you provide.

I continue to work on several bills that interest our District 5 residents. I greatly appreciate all the communication I receive from District 5 to hear your thoughts and concerns. Feel free to reach out and contact me at dave.rowley@legis.iowa.gov or if you are ever in Des Moines, please let me know in advance and we can meet.



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STAFF DIRECTORY

- Brad Hicks, Publisher**
publisher@spencerdailyreporter.com
- Seth Boyes, News Editor**
news@dickinsoncountynews.com
- Matt Heinrichs, Sports Editor**
sports@dickinsoncountynews.com
- Pam Banta, Legals/Classifieds**
legals@dickinsoncountynews.com
- Doris Welle, Sales/Staff Writer**
doris@dickinsoncountynews.com
- Skyler Sebby, Design Editor**
ssebby@spencerdailyreporter.com

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