

Testimony for the North Dakota Legislature February 10, 2025, on Senate Bill 2307

Hi, my name is Dan Wakefield. I am from Devils Lake. I retired from full time teaching in May of 2022.

A central focus of Senate Bill 2307: Who is/are the media Gatekeeper(s) in North Dakota public schools and libraries?

I testified at the 2023 legislative session on the school and public library bill.

To recap that testimony:

[In the Fall of 2021 and January of 2022, a staff member at my high school used federal grant money to purchase books from a Twin Cities vendor. Dozens of books were placed for ease of student access in each of the social studies classrooms. When the first shipment arrived, from a cursory review, I appraised some of the books to be of questionable value for adolescents based on theme or content. When the second January shipment arrived, with more of the same, I re-boxed and removed those from student use. When the school year ended, I examined the content of several of the books from both shipments and advised the administration that several of them were, in my judgement, to be inappropriate by theme or content for adolescents, that parents and guardians if aware would object, and that they should take a look before making them available in the coming school year. I was then thanked for the heads up. I also at that time asked the staff member who ordered the books how the selection was made. I was told it was left to the Twin Cities vendor to determine. In a return visit to the department classrooms in the Fall of 2022, all of those books I had surveyed and questioned still remained in the bookcases that had been provided for easy student access the school year before.]

Background: In the last couple of weeks of the 2022 school year at my school, books, periodicals, and other physical media, on a wholesale scale, were dispatched from the school library to dumpsters and the landfill. This follows the pattern from years earlier when the stacks at the middle school were also removed in our school district. In these transformed spaces that go by names like “media centers”, study spaces are now arranged for individual or group seating that supports access for using and charging laptops and tablets.

Laptops and tablets, when used with purpose by students in multiple classes, are powerful learning tools that can greatly support education.

Or, not unusual - when network safeguards are not employed and diligently updated in the school setting - digital devices become online conduits for student distraction – including gaming, harassment, and inappropriate video.

Schools have also recently employed electronic billboards, often prominently located in high foot-traffic areas like the school commons or near the main office. Besides displaying information ranging from weather forecasts to school activities, our school began announcing the arrival of digital books, a tab or keystroke away on the school internet network.

The question relevant to addressing the intent of the library bill is who should be the gatekeeper that gets to control content?

Who gets the say what books and media goes, what stays, and what gets into public schools and libraries?

It's often one person deciding for the student, the family, the community, the school: should it only be the values of a librarian, a school employee, or a teacher deciding for everyone?

Or in my experience with the fulfilling of the Federal Striving Readers grant – who selected the books placed in the SC 103 classroom – was it an employee(s) randomly packing books in a Twin Cities vendor's warehouse; or a faceless person(s) in a governmental office from a time zone away? Educational goals and content are historically the responsibility of state and local government.

When school staff discusses appropriateness of content used in media in the school setting, the responsibility for oversight is sometimes dismissed with a comment like – What difference does it make, they've (students) got it on their phones? True, especially in schools that allow student phone use in school – G5, and students can flip the switch – to distraction on You Tube, Tic Toc, or even worse.

So though often a valid point regarding schools with student phone use, the response ignores important considerations: how about the objections made by many in the school and local community who do care and consider indifference to media damaging and corrosive to learning and the broader culture: students, parents and guardians, staff; and community members who finance public education.

An aside – my opinion – impact on education:

[To a degree it doesn't matter how much public money is appropriated for schools or what new and supposedly improved initiative is imposed on public education every 5 years – test scores will continue to drift lower in schools that embrace the multi-year ongoing, ever-

growing culture of distraction – for the cause of fully embracing technology – without real filters that actually work on phones, tablets, computers, etc. preventing cumulative student losses in time and attention. Despite public schools still delivering outstanding results for many students – many parents and guardians won't risk the odds of institutionalized underachievement – no wonder, why more and more of them continue to imagine a better outcome and desert public schools for home schooling or private schooling if it's an option.]

I want to address an objection I heard in the media reporting regarding the library bill in the last legislative session. Librarian opponents termed proposed law addressing book and media guidelines for young children and adolescents book banning (what Nationalist Socialist university student mobs did collecting and burning books, they found objectionable in 1930s Germany). Ironically, in my community, what I would describe as the gutting of our public school libraries, removing wholesale quantities of books and other media materials, was carried out under the direction of library personnel in favor of more digital support space. Staff received notice of only a few days to claim materials headed for the landfill. Though staff did take possession of a small fraction of what was removed, I am not aware whether the community received significant notice.

Why was the removal and destruction of a large portion of a school library's contents removed and destroyed? When and to what extent should a community be consulted over ending a cultural legacy spanning decades? If a community is not consulted, does the consequent removal and destruction of the contents by a few constitute a form of autocratic book banning?

Check the studies in relation to the effects of both digital and printed mediums on children and youth regarding health, wellness and cognition. Bound books and physical media should be preserved for use in schools and media. Fortunately, in most school and public libraries new and old (including those undergoing renovation) that I am familiar with in North Dakota this is still the case.

Why does it matter who gets to decide what books and media materials are appropriate for public schools and classrooms?

Here is one of the books I found objectionable from the federal grant that ended up in the social studies classroom in my school: *Odd One Out* by Nic Stone (ref. pp. 226-227, p. 265, 2018, Crown Books)

And here is a book being read by a student in a rural secondary school I was subbing in recently: *Reapers of the Dust* by Lois Phillips Hudson (ref. pp. 87-88, p. 147, 1984, MN Historical Society Press)

Personal Story / Summary:

1. It matters, because young children and adolescents in school are not intellectually and emotionally ready for adult content in the form of digital or print media.
2. It matters, because in our country, citizens locally and through their state and local representatives should decide what is age-appropriate content for children and youth reflecting local and community interests and values, not autocratic individuals or totalitarian groups.
3. It matters to me personally, because a few individuals without my input or consent made me complicit in making available to adolescents in classes I was teaching written material wholly inappropriate for their ages and I believe at odds with and a betrayal of their parents and guardians.
4. It matters, because copious / extensive inspiring and intellectually rewarding digital and written materials for children and youth are available and should be used in public libraries and schools.