

NEWS

Woke PA's book ban push comes to Central Bucks board meeting



[Chris Ullery](#)

Bucks County Courier Times

Published 11:42 a.m. ET March 11, 2022 | Updated 12:56 p.m. ET March 11, 2022

A growing movement to ban “sexually explicit” books from school libraries arrived in earnest at Central Bucks School District Tuesday night.

About half of the 25 people who spoke at the school board meeting chastised the district for having in its libraries a list of material that parents called “pornographic” and illegal for minors to read.

The handful of books referenced this week all appear online through a group called Woke PA, which formed in November to urge parents to show up at school board meetings and get certain books pulled from shelves.

Tanya Kovacs, a Buckingham resident, told the school board that she and other parents have a “sacred obligation” to protect their children from obscene material said to be available throughout the school district.

Most of the books referenced Tuesday appear to be available only at the high school level, a review of Central Bucks' library catalogue online shows.

“What we are fighting against is blind trust. We are the gatekeepers for our children, not agencies. And we are fighting to remain consistent with our already established laws that have involved minors and sexually explicit and obscene content, and removal of these books only,” Kovacs said.

Kovacs did not give a list of book titles during her public comment, but rather set up the preamble of area parents who would name and read excerpts from the books they want removed from district libraries.

“This is not an attack on those with different points of view, and all views should be represented in print as long as they don’t include graphic content deemed unacceptable for minors by our current standard of law,” Kovacs added, citing federal statutes and court rulings regarding child pornography and obscenity cases.

Book banning, often targeting works focused on LGBTQ+ or racial issues, has been a growing issue at school board meetings in Pennsylvania and across the country over the last several months.

In York County, the Central York School District made national headlines in September after students and parents pushed back on a year-long “freeze” on loaning books related to racism and diversity to students.

For parents like Erin Mazzoni, another Buckingham resident, removing a book like Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye” is about protecting children from graphic scenes of sexual abuse described on two of the book’s 224 pages.

Movement for book ban in CBSD begins: Central Bucks district book ban? What 'Woke Bucks County' wants in its effort to 'reclaim our schools'

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Morrison’s book is set during the Great Depression and its main character, 9-year-old Pecola Breedlove, is sexually assaulted by her father.

“A father having sex with his daughter is not anti-LGBTQ or anything like that, thank you,” Mazzoni concluded.

Graphic and disturbing though it may be, Morrison’s first published novel has been praised and defended as an accurate, albeit fictional, account of Black experience at that time in American history.

A number of people read excerpts from several books, some adding that board members or employees responsible for their inclusion into libraries be fired or step down.

Although there didn't seem to be any direct references to Woke PA from those who spoke

out against the books, every book mentioned and nearly every part read aloud can be found on the group's website.

At least one person said they were there due to a recent email about the books and Tuesday's meeting.

An organized effort by Woke PA

Woke PA has maintained a list of about 15 books it says are available at various middle and high schools across Central Bucks and about nine other school districts.

The group initially began as Woke at Bucks County, its eponymous website created on Nov. 13 first focusing on Central Bucks.

On Dec. 14, the group renamed itself Woke PA and now also includes a few school districts in Montgomery County.

Little was known about the group when it first began. It's website was created using an anonymous registration company and the site offers no information on its administrators or members.

The website describes the group as a "grassroots" effort attempting to "reclaim our schools from activists promoting harmful agendas."

No social media accounts appear to be tied to Woke PA, but the group's website appears to be modeled off similar nationwide campaigns.

Woke PA's book list contains titles also found in a list of books under No Left Turn in Education's webpage on "Exposing Indoctrination" and much of the language found throughout the website is identical to another group, Parents Defending Education.

While Woke PA may be taking inspiration from national groups, the unknown leaders behind the Bucks County movement do appear to be local.

Rumors have cropped up on social media claiming that ReOpen Bucks, a group that has long fought against mask mandates in schools, is either in charge of or is involved with Woke PA.

ReOpen's Twitter account in February posted that it had "absolutely nothing to do with 'wokePA' or any movement anywhere that is not focused on the issue of COVID/return to

normalcy.”

“Any suggestion to the contrary is either ignorance or deceit,” the posted added.

Yet the organizations seem to share members.

A member of the group’s private Facebook page shared an email with this news organization this week they said came through an email group for Central Bucks parents that ReOpen Bucks maintains.

The email, which appears to have been sent by Mazzoni on Tuesday morning, reminds recipients of the meeting to come that night and that a group of parents will be reading from “this filth” during public comment.

While the email doesn’t mention ReOpen Bucks, Mazzoni reminds readers to email elected Central Bucks board members who have voted against mask requirements.

“(Montgomery County) is still in masks in some schools. (New Hope-Solebury School District) just voted to go mask free a few days ago. So a LOT of schools have not had normalcy. You can thank our strong board members for giving our children a normal school year,” Mazzoni wrote.

“We have a website that you can anonymously post books that have explicit material: <http://www.wokepa.com>,” Mazzoni adds.

CB school board debate of books

With few exceptions, every excerpt read or scene described as obscene, pornographic or lewd were repeated nearly verbatim from selections posted on Woke PA.

Few who spoke described the plots of the books they read from, and those that did also seemed to use summaries posted on the group’s website.

Defenders of the books, including parents, teachers and a few high school students, spoke out against the efforts to censor what most described as important works addressing trauma and social issues that are relevant to students.

“Literature has a proclivity to guide the soul. It gives people something to relate, a silent promise that gleans ‘you too can make it through this.’” said Alexandra Coffey, a senior at Central Bucks West High School.

Coffey added that the books, as raw and painful as they can be to read, give representation to students living through similar experiences of bullying and trauma.

A book of nonfiction interviews with multiple transgender teens called "Beyond Magenta" was cited by outraged parents this week and appears on Woke PA's website.

The interviews include teens sharing stories of sexual abuse by peers and adults, stories Woke PA described as pedophilic material.

"These students being abused for their identities are the same ones that need these books that contain so-called inappropriate content. If these books are not appropriate for teenagers, then nor is the world they live in; the world you created," Coffey added.

Katherine Semisch, a retired Central Bucks English teacher, said the libraries already have a system in place for parents to request their children not be allowed access to certain books.

While multiple parents said they were only just recently made aware of certain books, Semisch said that attempting to restrict access across the school district is nothing less than "overreach."

"My question to you is: how is this not overreach? If you already have the means to say 'my kid will never read that book,' why do you have the right to decide for somebody else's kid, 'you will never read that book.'," Semisch said.

"The books are not there to arouse the kids, to teach them to do horrible things that they are not ever going to think of on their own ... the books are there to try to give voice to kids who don't know how to express the things that have happened to them," Semisch added.

"I recognize the sentiment behind the ban ... however, I would propose that such protection is unnecessary and ignorant of the greater literary value of these books," CB West Senior William Berriman added.

Berriman said the idea of banning books because of "vile" subject matter is akin to not teaching about the Holocaust.

"Although the subject matter is gruesome and perpetrators vile, our curriculum acknowledges there are valuable lessons to be learned from tragedy," Berriman said.

The district did not take any action on the books mentioned at Tuesday's meeting.