

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/book-removed-from-henrico-schools-as-governors-race-centers-book-banning/>

## Book removed from Henrico schools as governor's race centers book-banning

Book banning becomes latest fight in the political battleground of local education  
By [Anna Bryson](#) | on October 28, 2021

A novel about an interracial teenage romance has been removed from high school libraries across Henrico County after a woman criticized the book's sexual content at a Henrico School Board meeting.

Challenging books under the banner of parents' rights has been popular this academic year across the nation. As school board meetings have become political battlegrounds, book banning is the latest fight.

The author of the book said its removal is representative of recent nationwide efforts to purge school libraries of books that discuss race or center LGBTQ characters.

"All students should be able to find books that speak to them and relate to who they are, however books that contain pornography, pedophilia, child rape, glorify drug use, glorify anti police narratives, come with greater responsibility," Susan DuPuis said at the Henrico School Board meeting Oct. 14. "The book *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez is one such book."

DuPuis then read a graphic excerpt from the young adult novel that detailed a sexual interaction between a teenage girl and an adult man.

Following the meeting, eight copies of the book which were previously available in high school libraries across the division were removed for review, according to HCPS spokeswoman Eileen Cox.

*Out of Darkness* was [published in 2015](#) but wasn't challenged in any school division until this year, according to the book's author.

"That confusion between an idea, or a theme, or a kind of experience being in a book and an author endorsing that experience — I think that confusion is at the heart of any authentic concern about my book or other books," Perez told the *Citizen*. "And I say at the heart of authentic concern, because I don't think that most of the objections to 'Out of Darkness' and 'Lawn Boy' and the other books that have come under attack suddenly are based on authentic parental concern."

### Books on LGBTQ characters and people of color targeted?

In Fairfax County, Virginia's largest school division, the books *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison and *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe were removed from high school libraries after two people spoke at a school board meeting last month, [according to the Washington Post](#).

Then in Virginia Beach, school board members challenged six books earlier this month citing "sexually

explicit” and “divisive” language, [according to The Virginian-Pilot](#).

“I think that if you look at which books are being challenged, you will see that overwhelmingly, they are books that center experiences of non-white characters, queer characters, non-citizen characters,” Perez said. “It’s about in many ways, I think, pushing back against portrayals of an America that is diverse and complex, and it’s pushing back against any texts that are providing opportunities for readers to confront racism as a historical reality.”

Perez’s book sets the 1937 New London School explosion as the backdrop for a romance between a young Mexican American woman and a young African American man. The book explores the rewards and the costs of loving across color lines in that particular historical moment in Texas.

“As a writer, I’m unfazed by the insults of people who haven’t read my book,” Perez said. “But as an educator, and as a parent, I’m so concerned about what this means for education and the work that teachers and librarians are doing for people’s children.”

Book challenges and removals from school libraries are nothing new. But this school year has been remarkable in the number and consistency of the challenges, said Nora Pelizzari, the communications director for the National Coalition Against Censorship.

In recent years, the majority of book challenges have been related to stories about queer characters or characters with diverse gender identities. But this academic year, the NCAC has seen a significant uptick in challenges to books that address race or racism, according to Pelizzari.

“We’ve still seen a lot of challenges to books that deal with sexuality and gender,” Pelizzari said. “But there’s been this huge increase in challenges to books that tell stories about racism, or that sort of center the experience of racialized violence or bigotry, or that just talk frankly about race.”

No Left Turn in Education, an organization that opposes critical race theory and comprehensive sex education, [lists on its website books](#) that are “used to spread radical and racist ideologies to students.” These books include *Out of Darkness* and the two books that were removed from Fairfax County Public Schools libraries.

Much of the recent backlash against certain books in school libraries is being driven by social media and websites like No Left Turn, according to Jonathan Friedman, director of free expression and education for PEN America, a nonprofit that works to defend and celebrate free expression.

No Left Turn’s founder, Elana Fishbein, did not immediately respond to emails from the *Citizen*.

“This is no longer just a single book, and it’s not isolated,” Friedman said. “My general sense is that a lot of these complaints aren’t necessarily coming from parents who have children who have actually read the books in question.

Republican [Christopher Holmes](#), who is running against incumbent [Del. Schuyler VanValkenburg](#) (D-Henrico) in the the 72 District House of Delegates race, also chimed in at the school board meeting. He didn’t name a specific book, but said he’s concerned about what children are being taught in schools.

“I stand here tonight because I’m upset because it’s coming to my attention that there is inappropriate — and I was gonna say sexual material, but it’s pornographic material,” Holmes said. “I just had someone send me a picture of the book cover. It’s disgusting. I don’t know how other material was

approved, or what purpose it serves, other than the corruption of our children, and the taking away of their innocence.”

Holmes later used the video of himself speaking at the school board meeting in a campaign message on Twitter.

Another Henrico parent, Dana Delucia, took the stand at the meeting to describe a book that she said her sixth grade daughter was assigned to read last year about Killer Kane, a fictional character who murdered his wife.

“This, I suppose, was meant to teach resilience to sixth-graders, but I argue that there are other ways to teach resilience and other books,” Delucia said. “I’ve lost confidence in who’s making choices. . . This matters to us and we will do whatever we have to do, because it’s important.”

Delucia also spoke out against [HCPS’s mask rule](#), and said that “covering up a child’s vital airways should be a choice.”

### **Book review process**

According to the HCPS policy manual, the Henrico School Board subscribes to the principles set forth in the School Library Bill of Rights and concurs that schools are responsible for providing materials on opposing sides of controversial issues, providing materials representative of many religious, ethnic and cultural groups, and placing principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice in the selection of materials.

The Henrico Schools division has a [policy](#) and [supporting regulation](#) that address the selection and reassessment of instructional materials.

The Instructional Materials Review Committee has 41 members and changes every year, with members serving for three years. In general, the committee includes a school board member, the chief learning officer, directors of instruction, literacy specialists, parents, school administrators, librarians, and teachers. The school board representative is Alicia Atkins, who represents the Varina District.

The review process, which should be triggered by the complainant, is lengthy, and can take a few months from start to finish.

School staff members first are supposed to attempt resolving the situation in a number of ways before inviting the complainant to file his or her objections in writing. If the complainant turns in the completed form, the IMRC will read the book in its entirety and provide a recommendation to Superintendent Amy Cashwell, who then will present the report to the school board.

The last time the review process was conducted was in 2011, according to Cox.

HCPS’s regulation does not include any language about what’s supposed to happen to the book while the review process is taking place.

The NCAC advises school divisions to keep the challenged book in the curriculum or on the library shelves until the formal review has taken place. If the book is pulled immediately, that privileges the opinion and the personal beliefs of the complainant as opposed to professional decision making that went into including that book in the classroom or in the library in the first place, Pilizzari said.

“That book made it onto the shelf because a librarian made a choice based on guidelines or recommendations or reviews, or other sort of professional guidance,” Pilizzari said. “When an individual or small group’s personal viewpoints and beliefs are allowed to determine what gets to stay on the shelf, that is censorship, and it hurts students.”

### **Gubernatorial campaign joins in on book banning discussion**

With one week until election day, Virginia Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin [released an ad](#) featuring Laura Murphy, a Fairfax County mother who in 2013 launched a campaign to convince the school board to ban the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, [the Washington Post](#) reported in 2013. She said at the time that her son, then a high school senior, had nightmares after reading a book assigned to him in his senior Advanced Placement English class.

The book, which tells the story of a mother who kills her child to save her from slavery, contains scenes of rape and bestiality.

Murphy’s fight made its way to the Republican-led General Assembly which passed two versions of a bill in 2016 and 2017 that would have given parents the right to opt their children out of these books containing sexually explicit material.

If enacted, the bill would have been the first law in the U.S. to allow red flagging literature for sexually explicit language in schools. Former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe vetoed both bills.

Education has been at the center of the tight gubernatorial race since McAuliffe, a Democrat who is seeking the office again, said that he didn’t think “parents should be telling schools what they should teach.”

Notifying parents of all books with sexually explicit language would involve red flagging a significant portion of the classical literary canon.

“We have to be very cautious around this,” Friedman said, “Because next thing you know, you could have a parent who wants to opt their child out of learning about science, evolution, vaccines, American history, slavery, global political norms, I mean, whatever kind of taboo topic there is.”

Another state where book banning is a hot-button culture war issue is Texas, where Perez’s book was challenged in three school districts. A Republican state lawmaker [launched an investigation](#) into what books Texas school districts have, and provided school districts with a list of about 850 book titles asking if they have these books and how many copies.

“The next thing you know, you’re going to have other legislature legislators and other parents taking all the list of 850 books to their school districts and kind of combing the libraries for any of these books,” Friedman said. “It’s tongue in cheek, but it would almost be simpler to just get rid of the library entirely.”

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/more-diverse-workforce-is-goal-of-new-henrico-schools-talent-acquisition-ambassador/>

# More diverse workforce is goal of new Henrico Schools' talent acquisition ambassador

The position is funded by federal COVID-19 relief funds.

By [Anna Bryson](#) | on November 17, 2021

For the second year in a row, the Henrico County Public Schools division is serving a student population whose largest group is Black students.

Over time, HCPS's student population has become more diverse and less white. However, the teacher population has remained overwhelmingly white — 78% to 80% during the past five years.

While bleak, it's not a problem unique to Henrico. Nationwide, about 80% of teachers are white, [according to federal data](#), while more than half of students attending public schools are people of color.

One goal of HCPS's 2018-2025 strategic plan is to recruit and retain a diverse group of staff members. In an effort to move in that direction, the school system created a new position: talent acquisition ambassador.

Kenya Jackson started in the new role in early November and works to assist the division in efforts to recruit and retain a diverse workforce.

“Having a diverse, strong quality, teacher workforce — it will only support our community and Henrico County as a whole,” Jackson told the Citizen. “Being an educator of color. . . and now raising two students of my own in Henrico County. . . I'm so very fortunate for all of the experiences of all of their teachers, but I can say that it has been particularly enriched by having diverse academic environments.”

All students benefit from having teachers of colors, [research shows](#), while Black and brown children in particular benefit both academically and emotionally from having teachers who look like them.

“When students have that opportunity to connect with someone that looks like them, there's this authentic connection that they may feel that may inspire and boost their confidence to be vulnerable enough to take risks, and think critically, and just engage in a different way in the classroom,” Jackson said.

Black students who have Black teachers are more likely to be placed in gifted programs, and are less likely to receive suspension and expulsions, according to [recent research](#).

Jackson started her career in HCPS in 2000 as a school counselor in middle schools, then for 15 years served as school counseling director. In 2017, she transitioned to the Human Resources department as a hiring specialist for middle schools. After four years in that role, she went to Hanover County for four years serving as the assistant director, and then director, of human resources.

“This is my 22nd year in education, and there are valid justifications that teachers of color do leave the profession,” said Jackson, whose husband, Michael, is principal of Hermitage High School.

And they do leave the profession at higher rates than their white counterparts — which is why part of Jackson’s job is to implement strategies that will retain teachers of color.

“As a Black educator, I know that being one of very few teachers of color. . . there is this added pressure of wanting to support students of color,” Jackson said. “But when you are very few, that becomes a bit of a weight. We have to recognize that our teachers of color, sometimes they’re a different weight than some of our white colleagues and counterparts.”

One of Jackson’s major focuses early on in her role is to dive into the data to see where HCPS’s teachers of color are placed from a magisterial perspective, endorsement perspective, and from a school perspective.

As part of the recruitment effort, Jackson will be working to identify every teacher pipeline.

In recent years, many teachers of color haven’t entered the teaching profession from a traditional teaching preparation program, according to Jackson. They enter the profession through an alternate means of licensure.

“Because they didn’t have the same level of teacher training — they certainly have the relevance of the content knowledge — but they have not yet truly developed their craft,” Jackson said. “We have to make sure that we’re supporting them differently. We have to differentiate those supports.”

Jackson’s position is being funded using HCPS’s share of the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (or ESSER) grant as part of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, which was signed into law in March.

Of the school division’s [\\$78.3 million share](#) of ESSER III funds, \$1 million was used to fund three years of Jackson’s position and two social worker positions.

The ESSER III draft plan [originally did not allocate](#) any money for diversity efforts. At a public hearing regarding the plan, several community members called for funds to be spent on efforts to hire a diverse workforce that mirrors the demographics of students. Following the public hearing, school division officials [revised the plan](#) to include the \$1 million adjustment.

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/henrico-education-association-plans-push-for-collective-bargaining/>

# Henrico Education Association plans push for collective bargaining

By [Anna Bryson](#) | on October 13, 2021

The Henrico Education Association, long known as the local teachers union, has been advocating for Henrico’s educators since the 1970s. But it has never been a true union since it hasn’t been able to collectively bargain; that’s because – until earlier this year – Virginia was one of three states in which local government and school board employees lacked that legal ability.

On the last weekend of the 2020 regular session of the General Assembly, however, the Virginia House and Senate passed a compromise bill that repealed the ban on collective bargaining. The bill was “permissive,” meaning that public sector employees can negotiate agreements only if individual localities vote to allow that process to occur.

The right for local government workers to unionize must be permitted by a local ordinance or by a resolution. For teachers, that means the local school board has to vote to approve a resolution.

“This elective approach to bargaining with unions gives organized labor half a loaf in Virginia,” said Rip Verkerke, director of employment and labor law studies at the University of Virginia law school. “But that’s half a loaf more than they had under the preexisting ban on all public employee collective bargaining.”

Although the law was not as robust as advocates sought, overturning the ban that had stood since 1977 is seen as a historic turning point for Virginia’s labor movement. The law took effect on May 1, after being delayed by Gov. Ralph Northam, who cited the impact of COVID-19 on Virginia’s economy.

Virginia has been ranked as one of the [best states for business](#) for years. It’s also been consistently ranked one of the worst states for workers, until this year when it moved from last up to [number 23 in Oxfam’s annual ranking](#).

The HEA’s collective bargaining committee has been meeting for almost a year to plan its way to collective bargaining.

“Because of Virginia’s history with collective bargaining, there’s a strong negative association with the term and the practice, but it comes mostly from a lack of knowledge and a lack of information — and that’s among teachers and school staff,” said Elizabeth Broda, a teacher at Henrico High School who sits on the HEA’s collective bargaining committee. “I think it gets washed away that collective bargaining could make significant improvements for students, not just for teachers, and that it’s not some corruptive evil that it’s been made out to be in past moments.

“This really could be, or will be, a good thing for students who have a variety of needs that can’t always be met by teachers who are overstretched and underpaid.”

## **‘No plans’ currently for resolution from Henrico School Board**

So far, there hasn't been a resolution passed for school board employees in Virginia. One in Loudoun County Public Schools and one in Richmond Public Schools are set to appear on school board agendas this month.

One way for a resolution to get on a school board's agenda is for the school board to take it upon itself to introduce one. That's what is happening with the Richmond School Board, which counts several members who are explicitly friendly to unions.

"I expect that more liberal localities will promptly take advantage of the provisions of the new law and authorize collective bargaining with teachers' unions," Verkerke told the *Citizen*. "Most elected officials in those areas are pro-union, and they will be happy to extend this new right to their workforce."

Henrico School Board Chair Roscoe Cooper III said that the board has "no present plans to place such an item on the agenda."

After a school board passes a resolution allowing for collective bargaining, the next step is to follow the certification process, then meet the threshold to trigger an election. If 30% of teachers sign cards to show their support of forming a collective bargaining union, then a secret election would be held. If the union wins through the majority of votes, then the union has secured certification and can begin bargaining.

"We're obviously going to be working very hard to engage across the Commonwealth to get those resolutions passed," said John O'Neil, director of communications and public affairs for the Virginia Education Association.

But if school board members don't introduce the resolution themselves, it will be harder to get a resolution on the agenda.

HEA members on the collective bargaining committee are working out plans to build relationships with school board members, hoping to earn their support and introduce the resolution.

But, if the Henrico School Board doesn't bring it upon itself to introduce the resolution, the HEA would have to go a different route. The law allowing collective bargaining for local government employees didn't prescribe all of the parameters typically found in collective bargaining frameworks for school staff and their employers. However, it's clear that in order to win collective bargaining, a local school board must adopt a resolution endorsing bargaining and recognize the bargaining agent.

"I think we know that the school board could easily vote it down, which is why it's important for us to have community support not just from other unions but our students' families," said Patrick Miller, HEA president. "We believe better working conditions for teachers equal better learning conditions for students."

Another path to get a resolution on the school board's agenda involves getting the majority of people in a "unit" (a group of specific employees, such as teachers) to sign authorization cards indicating that they want union representation in collective bargaining. From there, the school board has 120 days to consider the collective request to negotiate.

The HEA is planning for both possibilities, Broda said.

In more conservative localities, it's much less likely for a school board to authorize collective bargaining, according to Verkerke.

"[S]chool boards and local governments in more conservative areas of the Commonwealth tend to be hostile towards unions, and I'm reasonably confident that none of them will pass the necessary resolution authorizing collective bargaining," Verkerke said.

### **Teachers dealing with burnout, working overtime**

Unless a more forceful law is passed in a future General Assembly session, collective bargaining for teachers lies in the hands of local school boards, and the current law doesn't allow a way around this.

Whether or not the HEA receives collective bargaining rights could have long-lasting impacts on recruitment, retention and the relationships between teachers and school division officials.

This year especially, teachers in Henrico and throughout the commonwealth have expressed their feelings of exhaustion and burnout just weeks into the school year.

"There's been more than one incident where many tears have been shed, angry tears, because it's too much to be honest," said Kari King, a first-grade collaborative teacher at Dumbarton Elementary School. "We really are trying to keep our head above water with all of this stuff, not to mention the anxiety and stress that comes with the global pandemic."

Due to a shortage of bus drivers and more than 100 teacher vacancies in HCPS, teachers are working overtime more often than ever, some teachers claim.

"I don't know how you could possibly do this job within your contract hours. I don't think it's possible," King said. "But they keep loading on more and more stuff for us to do."

Anticipating the potential of substitute teacher shortages going into this school year, each school was provided at least one permanent substitute position, to assist with covering classes on a full-time basis, according to Henrico Superintendent Amy Cashwell. As the school year got underway, school administrators reported the occurrence of unfilled substitute jobs, and the fact they'd had to lean on staff for coverage at times.

"Our ultimate goal would be to eliminate the need for teachers to provide coverage for unfilled substitute positions," Cashwell said in a statement provided to the *Citizen*.

But in the meantime, HCPS has identified funds to hire additional permanent substitutes to assist in filling this void. The jobs are posted and the school division is working to fill those positions now, Cashwell said. Starting on Oct. 18, teachers who use their planning time to cover a class will be compensated at their respective hourly rates.

### **'Collaboration is essential'**

HEA officials are focused on several key issues, including planning time, fair compensation and working outside of contract hours.

King said that some of the things contributing to working unpaid overtime are new data collection requirements, more assessments and a new reading program.

“Last year was hard, and this year is harder,” King said. “Part of it is because they’ve made some changes in a year where I think maybe we should have all been able to take a collective breath, and kind of get our bearings and maybe focus on the differences that COVID was creating.”

John Reaves, a teacher at Godwin Mills High School and former HEA president, said each day this year starts with a shortage of transportation, with bus drivers working hard and support staff there to receive students.

“It’s hard to give the amount of love these kids need in the wake of a traumatic disruption to their lives, academically, socially, and spiritually,” Reaves said. “I know we are all working around the clock to be there for the students, but I also worry about my colleagues who themselves have been pushing relentlessly hard – finding a balance in this new challenge seems extremely difficult to strike.

“We are all hoping this thing levels off, but everyday brings more obstacles.”

Collective bargaining for teachers in Henrico County could relieve some of the obstacles that teachers are facing this year after the pandemic brought monumental disruptions to education, HEA members have said.

“We are significantly more likely to be heard when we stand together,” Broda said. “We’re not always used to doing things together, because so much of our job is independent. But this is one of those times when collaboration is essential in order to improve all of the things we can possibly improve.”