

Alex Bridges Education Writing W07

Warren County schools suspends Second Step program

By Alex Bridges

The Northern Virginia Daily

The Warren County School Board has temporarily stopped a teaching program in use for years because it recently sparked concerns among some parents.

Board members voted 5-0 at their meeting Wednesday to suspend the use of the Second Step curriculum so they and the community can review the program. Chairwoman Kristen J. Pence, Vice Chairman Ralph A. Rinaldi and members Antoinette D. Funk, Andrea M. Lo and Melanie C. Salins voted in favor of the motion.

Rinaldi made the motion, which Salins seconded. Both members voiced concerns they had about the program and what it teaches. Rinaldi cited a promotional video he watched on the Second Step website and described some of the content as “disturbing.”

Parents cannot easily see the Second Step curriculum nor post the material because it is trademarked, Salins said. The Second Step website does provide some basic information about the program, she said.

“There seems to be a lot of gray area, and I’m not going to weigh the pros and cons over the social-emotional learning,” Salins said. “It might be great for some families. It might not be great for others.

“My children would be opted out of it,” Salins said. “That, I believe, is my role as a parent, but everybody needs to be able to make that decision for themselves. And I think the issue that has raised a lot of concern is that the parents have been robbed of their opportunity to make that decision for themselves.”

Salins went on to say that the program was “sprung on” parents and not presented in a clear way.

Prior to the action, two people spoke during the public comment period and criticized the board and division officials for allowing the use of the Second Step program.

Amber F. Morris, a parent and a newly elected member of the Front Royal Town Council, expressed concern and anger that the division replaced her child’s art class at Leslie Fox Keyser Elementary School with “guidance” this month at the beginning of the semester. Morris said she and other parents only recently received notification about the change. Parents of Warren County Middle School students learned during the winter break that the division would begin using the program, Morris said. Parents must opt their children out of the program rather than choose to opt in.

Morris questioned the program's curriculum and what it teaches through "social-emotional learning" — a term used on the Second Step website. Morris also claimed school officials would not give her direct answers to questions she asked about the program.

Director of Personnel and Communication Shane Goodwin explained by phone Thursday that the division provides elementary art class at Leslie Fox Keyser one semester and then at E. Wilson Morrison the other semester. Keyser pupils then receive instruction through "guidance" in which a counselor visits classrooms and teaches students using curriculum in the Second Step program, Goodwin explained. The division began to use Second Step seven years ago.

Warren County Middle School planned to implement the program this month and notified parents of its use for the second semester, Goodwin said. Warren County Middle School had been using a program called "life skills" during extended learning time, Goodwin explained. Skyline Middle School had used the program "with a lot of success," he said. Some of the elementary schools also had used the program, Goodwin said.

The guidance counselor would rotate visits among the classrooms and teach topics using the Second Step program curriculum, Goodwin said. The curriculum has been in use at the elementary schools and at Skyline Middle School, Goodwin reiterated. Skyline Middle School uses the Second Step curriculum as needed, with topics such as bullying prevention, working in groups and making friends.

Also at the meeting, members voted to:

- Elect Pence to serve as chairwoman and Rinaldi as vice chairman.
- Appoint Pence to serve as the representative on the Mountain Vista Governor's School Board for calendar year 2022.
- Appoint Rinaldi and Salins as the board's representatives on the county's Building Committee.
- Appoint Director of Finance Robert Ballentine as the clerk of the school board.
- Appoint Kendall Poe, administrative assistant to the director of personnel, as the board's deputy clerk.
- Appoint Assistant Superintendent for Administration George "Buck" Smith Jr. as the superintendent's designee to attend board meetings in Ballenger's absence.
- Approve the board's 2022 meeting calendar.
- Approve a resolution authorizing the superintendent to issue contracts.
- Schedule the public hearing for the fiscal 2023 budget for Feb. 2 or, in the event of its cancellation, on Feb. 16.

- Approve the purchase of 32 new laptop computers for 23 school employees and nine technology staff members at a total cost of \$41,616. The division would use money from a Virginia Public Schools Authority grant to buy the computers through a state contract with Dell. The laptops in use are between seven and nine years old.
- Approve a resolution authorizing the superintendent and the director of finance to pay bills in emergency situations.
- Increase the daily rate of pay for substitute employees beginning this month to comply with the Virginia Minimum Wage Act, which sets the minimum wage at \$11 per hour. Pay rates increase from \$71.25 to \$82.50 per day for full-day substitutes placed as instructional aides or secretary/clerical and \$41.25 for half-day substitutes. The board discussed the matter in its closed session prior to taking action because it involved changes to a contract the division has with ESS Northeast LLC to recruit substitute employees. The division also now starts paying substitutes who work 11 consecutive days or more at the long-term rate. The long-term rate had previously kicked in after 21 consecutive days.
- Appoint Ernestine Jordan as a substitute administrator to fill in for Alan Fox, assistant superintendent for instruction, while he is out.

Warren County School Board hears concerns about book

By Alex Bridges

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A handful of Warren County residents raised concerns this week over a book in high school libraries some parents called “pornographic,” while others warned that banning the novel amounts to censorship.

The School Board heard from parents and other county residents during the public comment period at its Wednesday meeting. Finance Director and board clerk Robert Ballentine also read letters from residents.

Chairwoman Kristen J. Pence, Vice Chairman Ralph A. Rinaldi and members Antoinette D. Funk, Andrea M. Lo and Melanie C. Salins attended the meeting.

Salins refuted accusations that she wants to ban books but did agree with some concerned parents that the novel cited at the meeting, “Life Is Funny” by E.R. Frank, contained pornography.

“Nobody has the Constitutional right to show another person’s child pornography,” Salins said.

Internet filters keep children from viewing pornography or certain YouTube material, Salins said.

“So parents send their children to school under the assumption that they will be shielded from adult, graphic, erotic, sexual content,” Salins said. “Parents can’t opt their child out of books that they don’t even know are in our libraries.”

Salins noted that the division offers a way for individuals to challenge books.

“I have no ability to ban a book on my own whatsoever,” Salins said. “This is about starting the ball rolling and parents knowing what’s out there and what the process is.”

“Life Is Funny” is available in the high school libraries, not at the middle schools, Superintendent Christopher Ballenger said by phone Thursday, correcting a statement made by a speaker at the board meeting. The division offers on its website a way to search for specific books at any of the school libraries, he added.

Ballenger explained at the meeting that no books have been removed from library shelves.

“A parent shared a list of books that were of a concern to them with the board through email requesting policy that cover selection and reconsideration,” Ballenger said. “The principals asked the librarians to pull the books so that they could review them, but the books are still in circulation.”

Per the policy, individuals wishing to review books or materials express their complaint to school personnel, who then notify the principal. The individual arranges a conference with the principal during which the administrator instructs the individual to file the complaint in writing using a form provided by the division. Once the principal receives the completed form, an ad hoc committee reviews the complaint; reads the book in question in its entirety; checks general acceptance of the material by reading reviews and consulting recommended lists, determines the extent to which the book supports the curriculum; and completes the checklist for the school committee’s reconsideration of library instructional materials. The principal reviews the checklist and makes the determination on what action to take regarding the material. The complainant can request further review by the School Board and the superintendent if they disagree with the principal’s decision.

At the meeting, Harmony Hollow Road resident Wendy Kurtz read an excerpt of the book that contained profanity and other language depicting sexual acts that some parents deemed inappropriate. Children in the audience were taken outside the boardroom during the reading.

“This is not about, you know, providing diversity to our children,” Kurtz said. “It’s pornography in print.”

However, Genevieve Roesch, of Front Royal, reading from a written statement, spoke against what she considered censorship.

“Adults’ discomfort should never take precedence over quality education,” Roesch read.

“Children who read broadly about topics that open the world to them are not more likely to

engage in dangerous behaviors and do not suffer from mental health issues as a result of that reading material.

“Children who process this content, supported by an adult guide are more capable of dealing with adversity and have more empathy for their fellow human beings,” Roesch read. “Do you want to protect your children from the idea that there could be teenage prostitutes, human trafficking, teenage transgender couplings, same-sex parents? The reality is that these things are a part of our world.”

North River District resident Angela Robinson, in her letter, thanked and lauded school librarians for their services.

“With the latest political stunt of wanting to ban books that are in our school libraries, I thought it was so important to acknowledge what our librarians do, day-in and day-out,” Ballenger read.

Happy Creek District resident and parent Erin Kennedy read from a written statement to the board about her concerns related to a recent Facebook post by Salins. Kennedy stated Salins asserts the secondary-school libraries house graphic, adult erotic fiction the member calls smut.

“Isolated passages that you deem explicit or graphic I suggest are not central to the works as a whole and are used by the authors to illustrate the sometimes ugly and very real world in which they have lived or observed,” Kennedy stated.

Children see far more “objectionable” material on social media outlets than available in the school libraries, Kennedy said.

“Where is this concern coming from?” Kennedy stated. “Did a group of parents contact with a sincere worry over books in our school’s library, or are you assuming a problem based on a list of concerning books pushed by a national, political action network?” Kennedy stated. “If a large number, say a majority, of parents is coalescing around the notion of removing certain books in our libraries, that would be one thing. However, I would be dismayed to learn that a school board member manufactured a problem within our community based on political agendas that do not directly impact our students.”

Kennedy went on to state that she, as an American, views efforts to limit free speech and independent thinking as “unpatriotic.”

“In short, I view trying to remove age-appropriate materials from school shelves as censorship,” Kennedy stated. “I also believe that parents have the right to decide what is right for their own children but not for mine.”

Janet Brome, a former Warren County Public Schools teacher, also spoke against banning books and echoed some of Kennedy’s statements. Brome urged the board to support openness in the school system, not censorship.

“Certainly, the banning of books about gender and race from our public institutions denies others the right to examine the full scope of human existence,” Brome stated. “If what you believe personally has merit, it will stand up to examination without having to eliminate access to what others would like to better understand.”

Eric Bartok, of North River, called the excerpt pornography and said he initially planned to read it but changed his mind.

“It’s terrible when people try to say that this is a First-Amendment issue,” Bartok said. “This is about protecting children from stuff that they do not need to be exposed to.”

Warren County schools survey polls cellphone use

By Alex Bridges

The Northern Virginia Daily

Teachers, parents and students weighed in recently on cellphones in Warren County Public Schools.

The division surveyed parents, students and staff after the School Board discussed the topic at its meeting earlier this month. Chairwoman Kristen J. Pence brought up the topic of cellphone use and noted the growing trend of students taking photographs and video with their phones and posting them on social media. Superintendent Christopher Ballenger said in some cases students have posted videos of arguments or fights between classmates. Board members suggested the division survey students, teachers and parents.

The online, anonymous surveys asked different questions of parents, students and teachers related to cellphone use. Respondents could indicate more than one reason for students using cell phones. Each survey allowed respondents to make additional comments along with their answers.

The division made the survey results available on its website and included the documents with the School Board’s agenda for its Wednesday work session.

Current policy allows students to possess cellphones, smartphones, tablets or other communications devices on school property and buses. A device must remain off and out of sight during instruction time unless in use for instructional purposes as directed by a teacher. No one can use a device with an unfiltered internet connection. A student who uses a device for any purpose other than permitted by policy could face disciplinary sanctions. School personnel may confiscate a student’s device and return it only to the child’s parent.

The survey results show that not all students follow the policy with most using their devices for entertainment or to keep in touch with parents, according to teachers’ observations.

More parents than not allow their children to take cellphones to school, mainly to stay in contact. Nearly all the 280 students — 93.9% — who took their survey said they have cell phones. When

asked if they took cell phones to school, 91.2% of the 277 students who responded to the question said they do. Responses showed that most students use their phones to communicate with family, to retrieve information for school research or check weather and traffic. A high percentage of students said they used their phones during downtimes such as at lunch or while waiting for the bus. But few students surveyed said they felt cell phones created problems with cheating, distractions from learning, bullying or posting photographs or videos without permission. Approximately 47% of the students said cellphones created none of these problems.

Many of the students surveyed answered “yes” when asked if they feel the school division should change any of the rules pertaining to cellphones. Some of the responses to the question included: “yes prolly not allow them to not bring them at all”; “Let students text a parent or guardian with proof that they are messaging them since you can’t always have a conversation with them over a school phone some things can be very private that students don’t want to talk about out loud”; “i don’t know do what you want i’m only 12”; “yes i think there should be a break in the day like 10-15 mins to use your phone”; “no bc i have no phones”; “Just no filming in areas with other students: for example, a lot of kids are making tiktok dance vids in the back of classes and it makes me wayy uncomfy.”

The survey asked parents:

If their children had cellphones. Of the 770 parents who responded to the question, 77.7% said their child has a cell phone and 22.3% said they do not.

If they let their child take their cellphone to school. The division received 742 responses, 74.3% said yes, 25.7% said no.

For what reasons their child may need to bring a cellphone to school. The results showed that 92.3% said for emergencies; 85.4% for communication with parents; 37% for communication with other family members; 4.5% for communication with friends; 25.9% to access information for school research, weather or traffic; 2.1% for entertainment; and 1.9% for socializing.

Their concerns about cellphone use in schools by students. The results showed that 85.2% of parents said cellphones would distract from learning; 38.9% said cheating or academic dishonesty; 53.4% bullying; and 53.1% posting photos or videos to social media.

What consequences they would support if a student misuses his or her cellphone in class. The results showed that 68.9% of the respondents support confiscation of the phone for the day; 62.5% said repeat offenders should check their phones in and out with school staff each day for a period of time, while 21.1% support taking the phone until a parent picks it up; 10% support in-school suspension while 1% backed out-of-school suspension.

Only 116 teachers responded to their survey. Of that number, 69% of teachers said 75-100% of their class brings cell phones to school; 17.2% say 50-75%.

The survey asked teachers:

Reasons why they see their students using cellphones. The teachers said 49.1% for parent communication, 11.2% for instruction, 86.2% for personal entertainment and 75% for social activities.

How frequently they tell students to put away their cell phones. The results show that 55.2% did this 1-5 times per class; 29.3%, 5-10 times per class; 14.7%, 20 or more times per class.

If they allowed students to use cell phones during class at appropriate times. Of the 115 teachers who responded, 53% said no while 47% said yes.

For what reasons students may use cell phones in class, if allowed; what problems they have with cellphone use in school; what support through policies or from the administration do they feel is needed.