23 Va. school districts have taken books off shelves in past two years

Zetta Elliott, a Black educator, author and poet, spoke frankly with fifth-graders at Richmond's G.H. Reid Elementary on Friday morning about social justice and the lack of Black and brown children in books.

She talked about how for years her books were tossed to the side by publishing companies, because "there's no market for books like yours." Her response? She began self-publishing. Because while it's frustrating to face discrimination, Elliott said, you don't have to accept it.

Elliott's book, "A Place Inside of Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart," has recently come under criticism in Hanover County. The picture book is about a Black woman who was shot and killed by police and a young Black boy's experience as he deals with the death.

"There is somebody in Hanover County who thinks it's garbage," Elliott told the group of fifth-graders.

"How would you feel if you made something that you thought was beautiful and somebody else called it garbage? What would you do? Would you care? No, 'sticks and stones,' right? Doesn't hurt me," Elliott said.

In February, Hanover Supervisor Michael Herzberg publicly called Elliott's book "garbage" after a student checked it out of the Cold Harbor Elementary library.

Herzberg in a February Facebook post said: "Hanover: It's time for your school board to create policy to get garbage like this out of YOUR libraries. Indoctrination has been going on for years and it has to stop. Slicing through flesh and bone is not appropriate for K-5."

Hanover's board is not alone. Around the nation, library books fuel the political divide. Book banning is on the rise at levels not seen in decades, according to the American Library Association — thanks in part to conservative parents increasingly challenging books and materials, particularly those that touch on race, sexuality and gender.

To understand the landscape of challenges to books in Virginia, the Richmond Times-Dispatch sent public records requests to each of the state's 132 public school systems seeking information on books that had been removed or placed under review in the past two school years.

Twenty-three school districts confirmed that they had taken at least one book out of circulation for content reasons, while 90 said no books had been brought up for review.

Six districts did not respond to records requests sent by The Times-Dispatch, and two others acknowledged requests, but sought to charge significant fees for relevant records.

Chesterfield County Public Schools, which did not respond to questions from reporters about challenged books, estimated the combined cost of responding to an initial request for documents related to book bans and a subsequent request for relevant email records from Superintendent Mervin Daugherty and School Board members at over $4,000.

Lisa Varga, executive director of the Virginia Library Association, said the crusade for banning books is nothing new, rather that it happens in waves.

“I think that we are seeing an acceleration because lists of books and pieces of books [being] taken out of context are so readily shared on social media. Then we are seeing a community response to that, sometimes with partial information, sometimes by people who haven’t read the books [because] they object to pieces that they have seen or heard about,” Varga said in an interview.

About a week before the November gubernatorial election, Republican Glenn Youngkin released an ad featuring a Fairfax County resident who nearly a decade prior waged a battle against Nobel laureate Toni Morrison’s book “Beloved.” The resident, Laura Murphy, said the book gave her son, then a high school senior, nightmares.

Inspired by a true story, “Beloved” depicts a Civil War-era Black woman who kills her own young daughter to spare her from enslavement. Youngkin’s October TV ad called out Terry McAuliffe, his Democratic opponent, for vetoing the so-called “Beloved bill,” when he was governor. The bill would have required school districts to notify parents of assignments containing sexually explicit content.

In April, Youngkin signed a similar bill into law.

Though “Beloved” factored into Youngkin’s campaign strategy, it has been reviewed in only one Virginia school district in the past two years, while Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye” was reviewed in three districts. (Each of those districts ultimately decided to keep Morrison’s work on the shelves.)

During a March virtual panel on book banning, Nikole Hannah-Jones, a New York Times journalist and author of “The 1619 Project,” said Youngkin’s campaign tactic is only the beginning of using elections to limit what children can read. Random House hosted the discussion in partnership with PEN America, a nonprofit working to protect free expression through the intersection of human rights and literature.

“They ran very successfully in Virginia on this,” she said, asserting that Republicans would adopt “the playbook” in future elections. “They are not going to stop,” Hannah-Jones said.

Survey: 1,145 titles banned

PEN America conducted a nationwide analysis from July to March and found that 1,145 books have been banned in school divisions in 26 states. Of the books, 72% are works of fiction, 47% are classified as young adult novels, and 18% are children's picture books.

The most frequently banned books are "Gender Queer: A Memoir," by Maia Kobabe; "All Boys Aren't Blue," by George M. Johnson; "Lawn Boy," by Jonathan Evison; "Out of Darkness," by Ashley Hope Pérez; "The Bluest Eye," by Morrison; and "Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out," by Susan Kuklin.

According to the survey, 41% of the titles have protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color, followed by 33% explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ+, 22% directly address issues of race and racism, and 25% include sexual encounters.

"We're seeing a [book ban] trend toward books written by people of color or those with an LGBTQIA+ background," Varga said. "They are being consistently challenged and held up as examples of something quote 'wrong.' I have a lot of empathy for the people who wrote those books or who have a similar perspective, because every time they open a newspaper or a website, they're seeing someone holding up a book that they relate to saying this is wrong. That re-traumatizes people, and it makes me very frustrated."

"Gender Queer," an autobiographical graphic novel by a non-binary and asexual author, was the most challenged book in Virginia, according to The Times-Dispatch's analysis. In the past two school years, it has been placed under review in at least nine school districts and removed from shelves in five, including Hanover.

"Lawn Boy," a coming-of-age novel about the trials and tribulations faced by a young Mexican American man, has been reviewed by five Virginia school systems — including Fairfax County, where a September challenge alongside "Gender Queer" for the books' graphic sexual content garnered national attention. None of those five has opted to remove "Lawn Boy" from circulation, although Fairfax's decision to keep the book is under appeal.

The six Dr. Seuss books that the late author's estate took out of circulation in March 2021 because of racist imagery were also among the most removed books in Virginia.

How books are challenged

Schools and public libraries have policies and procedures for people to challenge books.

When a book is challenged, a committee is charged with reading the entire book before making a decision, according to Judy Deichman, the 2022 president of the Virginia Association of School Librarians and the instructional specialist for library media in Richmond Public Schools.

Deichman said each school district has an outlined procedure and committee makeup. All that is asked, Deichman said, is to follow the policies and procedures that are set forth.

“We [librarians] do believe that every parent has a right to decide what their own child can read. Where we disagree is that all parents have a right to choose what every child can read,” Deichman said in an interview.

“Our biggest point we are trying to make is ... no one has the right to say ‘no child can read this book,’” Deichman said.

Deichman and Varga said their respective organizations have seen instances in recent years in which school systems bypassed their policies to pull books off the shelves.

“When you’re violating your own policies and procedures,” Varga said, “that’s very troublesome.”

Even when school districts are not circumventing their policies to remove books, opponents of certain books — from parents to county officials — have sparked intense pressure campaigns.

In November, a pair of Spotsylvania County School Board members called for books containing sexually explicit material to be removed from schools and burned.

A month earlier, during an Isle of Wight County School Board meeting, a group of parents read passages from “Out of Darkness” and other books they found objectionable and called for school system employees to be fired.

“Shame on every one of you that endorses this garbage,” said Windsor resident Jason Maresh, according to a video of the meeting. “Kids deserve better. ... I want you to take some accountability for it.”

‘A dangerous message’

Library books in Hanover County schools have a shelf life of about 15 years. It’s a continuous cycle, as each year, crops of outdated old books are pulled from the shelves to make way for fresh new ones.

The book selection process, however, has come under scrutiny of late by some Hanover School Board members. They question whether more “checks and balances”

are needed when it comes to securing new books annually, while floating the idea of a standardized selection process for school libraries countywide.

Herzberg, the Hanover supervisor who called “A Place Inside of Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart” “garbage,” referenced two pages in Elliott’s book. On one page, illustrative images show a crowd of people and a “Black Lives Matter” sign, while a third illustration at the bottom shows five faceless police officers, one holding a baton, in front of a crowd.

The accompanying page reads: “There is anger inside of me/ a fury deep down inside of me/ that is sharp enough to slice through air/ flesh/ bone & concrete,” along with an illustration of an angry boy.

Herzberg said in February: “Any messaging that portrays police officers in a negative light as this book does ... should not be in our schools, especially with the rise in murders of police.”

He said the book touts “a dangerous message” by showing images of anger and rage next to pictures of police officers, and that “our law enforcement deserve better.”

In Richmond on Friday, Elliott discussed scenes from “A Place Inside of Me.” In one, a young Black boy is happy playing basketball and then goes to the barbershop for a haircut. News is playing on a television and the boy sees that a Black woman has been shot by police. He first feels scared and then he goes to a rally.

Elliott then read to the students the same verses Herzberg referenced.

In an interview Friday, Elliott said she believes in teaching youth the truth. When she talks to children, she hopes she’s embodying possibility.

“I’m not afraid of having difficult conversations,” Elliott said. “I think unfortunately the book bans are really a consequence of cowardice.

“There are a lot of parents out there who don’t want to talk about injustices because it makes them uncomfortable and ashamed. It’s not about the kids at all.”

As for Hanover, she said: “Well, we’ll have to wait and see what happens, whether that book gets banned in Hanover County, I certainly hope not. But I’m really happy for all the people who are supporting me and think that books should stay in kids’ hands.”

Last fall, the Central York District School Board in Pennsylvania banned Elliott’s book “Milo’s Museum,” about a Black girl who opens her own museum. The board had banned any titles that dealt with anti-racism, and were written by or about people of color, until protests from students and parents prompted the school district to reverse its decision.

Efforts are ongoing nationwide to counteract book challenges and bans. In Brooklyn, the public library system is helping children across the county have access to challenged books. Out-of-state students between the ages of 13 and 21 can apply for a free Brooklyn Public Library electronic library card to gain access to the system's full eBook collection and learning databases. Normally $50, the library is waiving the fee as part of its Book Unbanned campaign.

The American Library Association's Freedom to Read Statement inspired the Brooklyn library system to launch its own initiative. The library association launched its own program, called Unite Against Book Bans, to bring together people who care about books and who are committed to the freedom to read.

In Northern Virginia, the Arlington Public Library held a "Wake Up & Read" weeklong event in April to build awareness around the recent surge of challenged books. Each day of the week, Arlington residents could visit a different library branch and receive a free cup of coffee and a copy of a challenged or banned book, while supplies lasted.

Shari Henry, the assistant division chief of public services for the Arlington Public Library and chair of the advocacy task force for the Virginia Association of Librarians, said that on the first day, the supply of challenged or banned books at the county's Columbia Pike library was gone almost immediately.

The idea of the event was to promote challenged and banned books so that people can read the titles and receive "real information" about the books, Henry said.

The library-goers lingered after receiving their free coffee and books that first day, having conversations among themselves and with staff to learn more about all the books in question, Henry recalled.

Henry stressed that "challenged" and "banned" should not be used interchangeably when talking about books. Not all books that are challenged will be taken off the shelves.

For those going after books, Henry said it's because elements of the book may be upsetting or jarring, but "that's what reading should do."

"Reading does open up different points of view to you, it opens up the world, it opens up other people's experiences to you," she said.

"That shouldn't be seen as dangerous, but I do think there's this movement now that sees anything like that as dangerous and threatening and that's what we're having to stand against."

Impasse over rebuilding George Wythe highlights Richmond's deteriorating school buildings

Demario Lonzer could have left George Wythe High School when his family moved to Richmond's North Side last summer. He wanted to stay, though, and now wakes up at 6 a.m. to catch a GRTC bus to a school that government officials say is in dire need of a rebuild more than 60 years after it opened.

Lonzer, 18, said he loves the school and its community in South Side, even if there are holes in the ceiling and buckets in the hallway collecting water from leaky pipes.

"They should have built a new school awhile ago," he said. "I know I probably won't be here once a new one is built, but I just want kids in the future to have a better school."

The need to rebuild Wythe, which serves a largely Black and Latino student body, has been a top concern for Richmonders for years. Mayor Levar Stoney has touted repairing the deteriorating South Side school, which was originally built in 1960, as a key priority for several years, but the project has been delayed due to rising school construction costs and political debates over management, how big a new school should be and other competing priorities.

While the school has been repeatedly highlighted in local news reports and political campaigns, dozens more local schools that are generations old are also in need of replacement or repair, prompting Virginia lawmakers to look for ways to raise the money to modernize school facilities in Richmond and across the state.

The fact that rebuilding Wythe remains at an impasse five years after the Richmond School Board approved a $225 million facilities plan serves as a reminder that the board, which voted 5-4 last year to take over all aspects of new school construction from Stoney's administration, faces an ever-worsening crisis of aging school buildings in the city an issue compounded by the three-alarm fire that broke out at William Fox Elementary School two weeks ago.

More than 40% of the city's school buildings have not had a major renovation in at least 50 years, according to the Commission on School Construction and Modernization, a panel established in 2020 by the General Assembly to assess the needs of local school divisions across Virginia and provide funding recommendations to the governor and the legislature.

That group does not include either Fox or Wythe, but it does include 10 school buildings: Open High, Bellevue Elementary, Summer Hill Preschool Center, Albert Hill Middle, Binford Middle, Barack Obama Elementary, Patrick Henry Elementary, Ginter Park Elementary, Thomas Jefferson High and the Adult Career Development Center that the commission says have not undergone significant renovations in at least 90 years, a threshold shared by just two other Virginia schools: Fairview Elementary in Galax and Madison Alternative Center in Norfolk.

“It’s really important to remember that this is not just an issue for Fox or the Fan District. George Wythe has been having issues and needing a new school for long time,” said Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, the chair of the school modernization commission and a Fox parent. “The city is near its debt capacity. They are struggling to meet their maintenance, construction and renovation needs. We’ve got to provide more tools at the state level.”

The problem of how to pay for school rebuilding is not exclusive to Richmond; there are nearly 180 Virginia schools, across 40 localities, that have not been renovated in at least half a century. The total replacement value of those schools: $2.7 billion.

The cost of rebuilding all schools older than 50 years old is at least $24.8 billion. (The commission only compiles replacement cost for schools built in 1970 or before, so replacement values for some of the schools were not available.)

If they aren’t replaced soon, the risk of buildings catching fire and health complications from moldy facilities or failing HVAC systems could make student learning harder and, at worst, endanger lives.

McClellan said she and other lawmakers have known for more than a decade that new comprehensive funding strategies are needed, and that the condition of old schools around the state have worsened as the General Assembly has taken only small steps to help localities replace and renovate schools.

“It’s growing because we keep putting it off,” she said.

But those looking for answers from the General Assembly have not found them yet.

Several House of Delegates bills that would let localities increase their sales tax by 1% to fund school construction projects, subject to a local referendum, were knocked down by a Republican-led subcommittee. A Senate version of the bill proposed by McClellan passed the Senate, but was struck down by a House committee on Friday.

Other legislative and budget proposals that she and lawmakers support to guide money for local school construction projects are still up for consideration.

Both chambers have acknowledged the need to address deteriorating school facilities in their budget proposals. The Republican-led House has included a loan rebate program in its proposal that could create up to $2 billion for school modernization and replacement, while the majority-Democratic Senate has endorsed former Gov. Ralph Northam’s plan to use $500 million of state general funds for school construction.

To replace all 22 of Richmond’s oldest school buildings would cost more than $400 million, according to the commission. But while that figure is mostly theoretical it highlights the scope of the financial and logistical burdens facing a School Board that has added overseeing construction projects to its purview.

Cost concerns are especially sensitive given that other projects in Phase I of the board's facilities plan ran over cost estimates And earlier this month, a Richmond City Council committee once again delayed discussion of whether to sign off on transferring $7.3 million to the School Board to start designing a new Wythe.

The ongoing dispute over Wythe in recent months has widened to include arguments about the proposed size of the school. The majority of School Board members say they want a smaller facility for up to 1,600 students. Stoney, Superintendent Jason Kamras and their allies, however, say it would likely open over capacity in that case and that they should stick with previous plans for a building that accommodates 2,000 students.

In a School Board meeting Tuesday, several parents called on the board to compromise, particularly in light of the fire at Fox and new state budget proposals that could cut funding for Richmond schools by $5 million to $20 million.

The board's decision to seize control of construction came as the city was prepared to issue a request for proposals for the Wythe project.

On per-pupil funding, Chesterfield ranks last among large Va. school systems

Responding to a parent who pressed Chesterfield County leaders to focus more on schools and noted that the county spends less per student than all of its neighbors and the state's large school districts, Chesterfield Board of Supervisors Vice Chairwoman Leslie Haley dismissed the numbers as false.

Haley doubled down in an email the next day saying: "I stated it last night and I will go on the record objecting to the comments in particular that stated: Chesterfield County students receive the lowest level of investment compared to kids in other similar school districts in Virginia," according to an email obtained by the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

In response to reporter questions asking what was wrong with the data — which is compiled each year by the state education department — Haley responded by noting that the county is studying raises for teachers before deferring to a deputy county administrator.

While some Chesterfield officials say the Virginia Department of Education's figures don't paint a fair picture, some county residents say it shows a county skimping on money for children.

Chesterfield County Public Schools spend an average of $10,061 per student, according to 2019-20 data from the Virginia Department of Education, the most recent year it has published. That figure places the county in the bottom 15 school systems statewide and is the lowest in the Richmond area.

Hanover and Henrico counties spend $10,829 and $10,330, respectively, while the City of Richmond spends $15,667 per student — 12th most in the state, according to the 2019-20 state data. All but Richmond spend below the statewide median of $11,421. This annual dollar amount spent on education is a mix of local, state, federal and tax dollars.

“We’re at a point now that I thought we would finally start addressing some of the needs to finally not be one of the last for per pupil in the state,” said Kyle Viele, chairman of the School Board’s Citizens Budget Advisory Committee, who acknowledged the county’s per-pupil number has remained stable even with population increases. “So the county would tell you that all that’s good that we’re being fiscally responsible and by fiscally responsible they mean you’re cramming kids together — you have kindergartners eating lunch in the morning and not getting out until four in the afternoon.

“So yes, from an efficiency perspective, it looks like we’re efficient. But that’s not the best thing for our kids. It’s not the best way to teach kids.”

Matt Harris, a deputy county administrator for Chesterfield, said VDOE’s calculation doesn’t account for money the school division spends on paying down debt related to new school construction, which may result in an extra $1,000 or more per pupil that goes untracked by the state.

“Bottom line, VDOE stats are a single piece of information that can be used to have a conversation about education, but it is far, far, far from a complete picture,” Harris said in an email.

While those figures would also not be included in the VDOE numbers for other school systems, Harris said Chesterfield’s debt is much higher than in other divisions. But adding $1,000 to Chesterfield’s per-pupil spending and nothing to other districts to account for their debt would still leave the division in the bottom 10 among Virginia school divisions with at least 10,000 students.

According to the data — which state law requires school divisions to publish each year — the localities that spend the most per public school student when grouped by enrollment size are Arlington County ($18,699), Charlottesville ($16,974), Mecklenburg County ($14,942), Falls Church ($18,984) and Surry County ($20,175, the most of any jurisdiction in Virginia).

School divisions in the four major Richmond area jurisdictions are all in the top 20% by enrollment size. Chesterfield’s per-student spending is the lowest among that group.

Richmond, Hanover and Henrico all rank significantly higher than Chesterfield on the state’s Local Composite Index, a metric that “determines a school division’s ability to pay education costs fundamental to the commonwealth’s Standards of Quality.”

Because Chesterfield's population and enrollment are larger than those of the rest of the Richmond area, the formula deems the county less able to pay — even though just 8% of Chesterfield children live in poverty compared to 33% of Richmond children — according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Based on 2019-20 budgets, Chesterfield's local funding for schools makes up a smaller share of the school division budget than in other Richmond-area localities.

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A school division's per-pupil spending dollar amount doesn't mean it's the same for every individual school, and spending at individual schools varies widely even within individual districts. Chesterfield spends the most on each student at Carver College and Career Academy ($17,203) and the least at Winterpock Elementary ($8,395).

Jim Wyckoff, a professor of education and public policy at the University of Virginia, said there is evidence that shows increasing per-pupil spending leads to improvement in student outcomes.

For example, a 2018 National Bureau of Economic Research overview on education spending found that increasing funding within individual districts led to higher test scores, higher graduation rates and, in some cases, higher wages for adults. But the way that money is allocated can affect the impact increased spending can have.

"If you are raising per-pupil expenditures," Wyckoff said, "you need to be investing that money in uses that are likely to improve outcomes for kids."

The top 10 districts in per-pupil spending in the state range across geographic areas, household income levels and enrollment sizes, while the bottom of the list is made up largely of smaller school divisions clustered in the southern and southwestern regions of the commonwealth.

While Chesterfield had more than 60,000 students enrolled in schools in the 2019-20 academic year, the combined enrollment of the 12 school divisions in the commonwealth that spent less on a per-student basis than Chesterfield was 54,810, according to VDOE data.

Ben Pearson-Nelson, president of the Chesterfield County Council of PTAs, said during a recent public hearing that he was "disheartened" to see Chesterfield once again come in last place for spending among similarly sized school districts.

"Paying as little as we can for our kids does not relieve a burden on the community. Instead, it shifts the burden onto parents, it shifts the burden on the teachers, it shifts the burden onto our kids and it shifts the burden onto organizations like the PTA," Pearson-Nelson said.