

Book Battle At Lylburn Downing

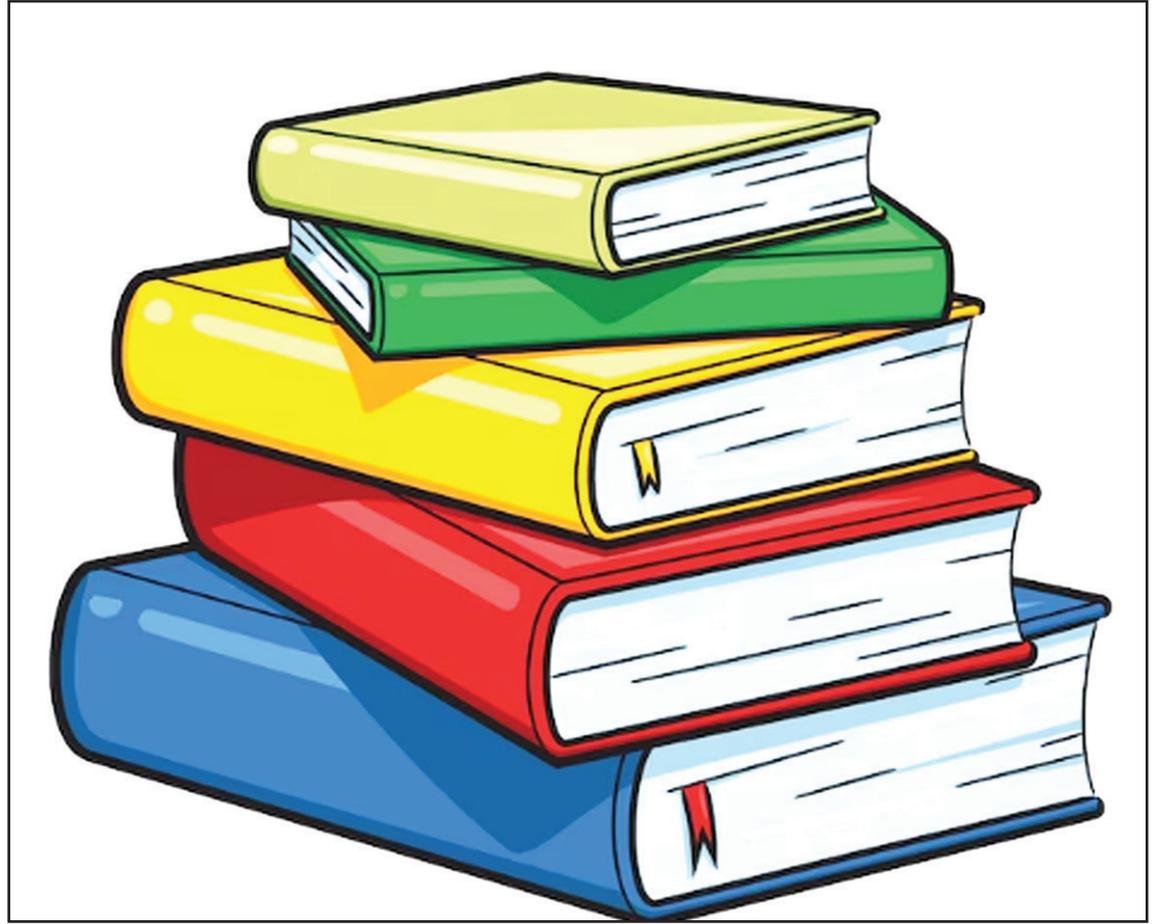
“I know it when I see it,” the oft-quoted comment from Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart to describe obscene material that he felt should not be available in the public square, is an apt phrase to explain why individual perception is the basis for objections people tend to make when seeking to have certain books pulled from the shelves of school or public libraries.

We all have our own opinions about what books are inappropriate for adolescent children to read when they are going through what is a formative and, for many, tumultuous, period in their young lives. It makes sense to not have books in a middle school library that contain sexually explicit or overly violent content. Where to draw the line on what is and is not appropriate material, however, is not as simple as it sounds.

Two learned individuals in our community with seemingly good intentions each made eloquent, articulate arguments that were diametrically opposed to each other on why and why not a certain book should be available in the Lylburn Downing Middle School library. This disagreement prompted a public discussion on how books are selected for the library and what the process is, or ought to be, for removing books found to be objectionable.

“For the past several weeks, we have been hearing from and listening to input from parents, grandparents, faculty, community members, who have, as you might imagine, a wide variety of input on this particular issue,” Lexington City Schools Superintendent Rebecca Walters told the 20-plus citizens who showed up at the Oct. 3 School Board to express opinions on the subject. “It is important that we have a community that is engaged in our schools, in the work that’s happening in our classrooms, in our buildings, and in our greater community, and we value the input that you have offered to us.”

Walters presented drafts of proposed new policies on the selection of library and instructional materials for the Lexington schools. The proposed new policies, which outline new protocols for responding to complaints about and determining whether to remove any materials, are to be voted on at the next School Board meeting on Nov. 7.



The selection of library materials, under the proposal, would fall primarily to the school’s librarian using the American Library Association’s guidelines. Ten selection criteria are laid out for the division. These include maintaining a “collection based on the academic programs,” having “materials that will allow students to develop as critical thinkers, through presenting multiple perspectives on controversial topics,” and supporting “a culturally responsive environment by including materials that encompass a wide range of cultures, backgrounds and perspectives.”

It is explicitly stated that materials “may not be removed solely for the ideas expressed therein; however, materials may be removed if they are determined not to be age appropriate for the intended audience due to content that is excessively graphic, vulgar, obscene, violent or sexually explicit.”

We believe the proposed new policies represent a reasonable response to the ques-

tions that have been raised about how library and instruction materials are selected and how complaints about any of those materials should be handled. It is our sincere hope that the current debate does not devolve into a culture war over what materials are and are not appropriate for a school library. That has happened elsewhere, leading to the banning of books containing content opposed by certain culture warriors.

Well meaning people can disagree over what is and is not appropriate material for a middle school library. Parents can and should take an active role in overseeing what books their children are reading. That parental responsibility, however, does not extend to making such decisions for other parents’ children.

Complexities enter into determining what is and is not age appropriate material. Stewart’s maxim of “I know it when I see it” does not necessarily apply here.

More State Funding For Schools Needed

A strong case can be made for Virginia spending more on K-12 education. According to a report issued last week by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, the state is significantly short-changing its public schools.

“Virginia school divisions receive less K-12 funding per student than the 50-state average, the regional average, and three of Virginia’s five bordering states,” states the JLARC report. “School divisions in other states receive 14 percent more per student than school divisions in Virginia, on average, after normalizing for differences in cost of labor among states. This equates to about \$1,900 more per student than Virginia.”

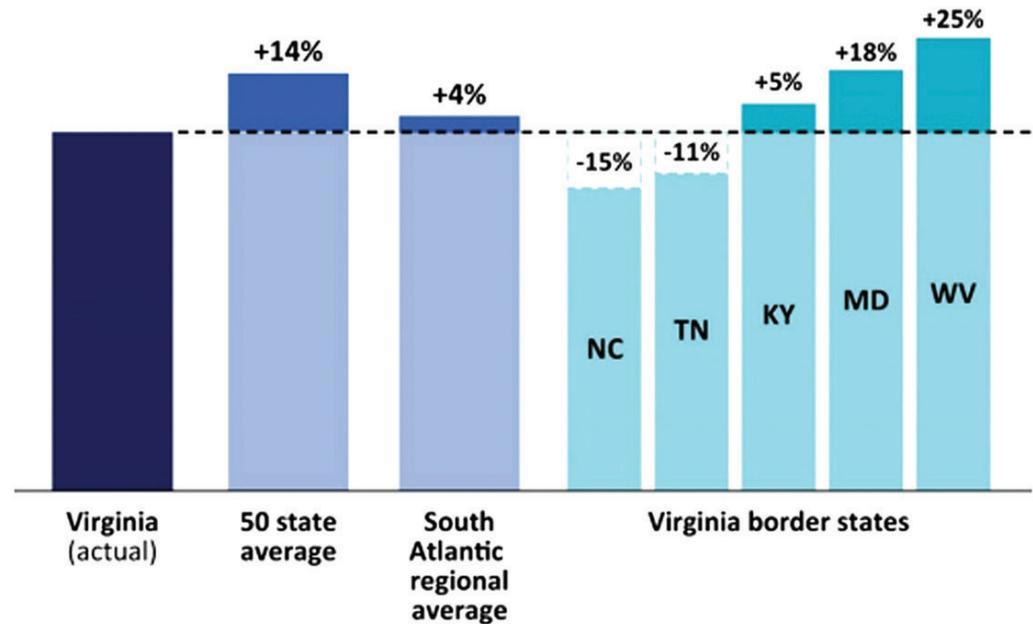
The report indicates that the Standards of Quality the state uses to determine funding underestimates staffing levels and compensation for teachers that are needed to provide quality educational services. Local divisions are having to make up the shortfall.

Formulas the state uses to determine the needs for individual school divisions are woefully outdated. The SOQs fail to take into account economies of scale for divisions with lower enrollments such as those in our rural area that have higher costs per student than divisions with higher enrollments. Funding for special education is not keeping up with the growing number of students in need of these services.

The JLARC study was undertaken at the direction of the General Assembly after legislators adopted a resolution to this effect during the 2021 session. The study can be found at <https://jlarc.virginia.gov/pdfs/reports/Rpt575.pdf>.

After identifying the problems with the methodologies used to determine state funding for local school divisions, the report offers both short-term and long-term solutions to correct these deficiencies. “These

Virginia school divisions receive less funding than national and regional averages (FY20)



SOURCE: JLARC analysis of NCES data, adjusted for cost of labor.

recommendations and policy options would improve the state’s education funding formula and better ensure a quality education for Virginia students. Much of the additional funding allocated under this report’s recommendations and options would go toward employee compensation, hiring additional staff as needed to address critical student needs (e.g., reduce longstanding achievement gaps), or providing support services to higher needs students. The return over time on this additional spending would likely be evident through a higher quality teacher workforce and students who are better prepared to succeed. These outcomes are expressly set forth as goals in the Code of Virginia for the state’s public K-12 system.”

We suggest that the General Assembly take the JLARC study’s recommendations and direct the Virginia Department of Education to implement them so that revised SOQs accurately reflect what local divisions truly need. This will take time – we’re not suggesting that the funding gap can be made up all at once.

We do believe that the report provides ample evidence of the need for boosting funding for education with a portion of surplus funds currently available in the state budget. It is our hope that the governor calls a special session of the General Assembly soon so legislators can complete their work on the budget.

Trouble At The YMCA

If nothing else, the YMCA of Virginia's Blue Ridge has a serious public relations problem with regards to our local branch, the Rockbridge Area YMCA. Two actions the YVBR has taken this year has left us and many Rockbridge area citizens wondering if our local Y has lost all vestiges of control of our local Y's operations.

Back in early January, the YVBR suddenly fired the much-beloved executive director of the Rockbridge Area YMCA, Bobbie Wagner, who, from all accounts that we have heard, had done a magnificent job in guiding our local Y's operations since 2016. Wagner, incidentally, was hired shortly after our local Y became affiliated with the YVBR. No reason has ever been given publicly for Wagner's abrupt dismissal, but the firing left a lot of hurt feelings in our community.

Four months later, after our local Y's advisory board had been in talks with the YVBR board to sever ties, the YVBR board abruptly dismissed our local Y's advisory board and proclaimed, per a purported directive from the national Y, that our local Y cannot go its own way.

Divorce is apparently not permissible in the world of the Y. What the Y has joined together, let no one pull asunder. When our local Y merged with the YVBR in 2016, we doubt anyone contemplated the thought of the marriage being anything but a happy one. Blissful newlyweds generally tend to perish any thoughts to the contrary.

But here we are, seven years later, stuck in an unhappy marriage. Absent any semblance of trust between the partners, we're not sure what can be done to save the marriage. The national Y and the YVBR may be able to dictate that our local Y can't go its own way while still being affiliated with the Y. Members of the local Y, however, cannot be compelled to remain in an organization that eschews local autonomy.

While divorce might not be permissible, the fissure, if it isn't repaired, is likely to lead to a lot of legal questions that will have to be answered. Does money raised here for the purpose of making capital improvements here go to the corporate office? Which side has been subsidizing the other? There appears to be much disagreement between the folks at the local level and those in the corporate office over which side was sending the other more money.



ROCKBRIDGE AREA YMCA staff members, including then-executive director Bobbie Wagner (second from left), meet children inside the local Y's new early learning center following its official opening last May. The YMCA opened the five-classroom facility in a separate building at 650 N. Lee Highway to help meet the child care needs of the area that grew during the pandemic. (N-G-file photo)

As these matters get hashed out, will the Y's services continue to be offered locally, without interruption? Will disenchantment with the Y's corporate and national offices cause local members to leave? What happens if membership plummets?

Yes, the YVBR has a very big PR problem here in the Rockbridge area. We suggest a joint public meeting of representatives of both sides to sort out this mess. The only way to save the local Y is to allow local input into its operations. Both sides need to be given an opportunity to air their differences in an open forum.

The YMCA has long been a wonderful organization that, according to its mission, puts

“Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all. ... Guided by our core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility, the Y is dedicated to giving people of all ages, backgrounds and walks of life the opportunity to reach their full potential with dignity.”

The Rockbridge Area YMCA has been an exemplar of this mission and these core values since it was established here 20 years ago. Our hope is that it will be around to grow and prosper for many years to come. Transparency and openness to public input would go a long way toward resolving the YVBR's PR difficulties and saving the Rockbridge Area YMCA.