

IW School Board bans ‘sexually explicit’ content

Vote to prohibit teaching on ‘systemic racism’ still pending

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

The Isle of Wight County School Board voted 3-2 on Feb. 9 to prohibit elementary and middle school students’ access to “sexually explicit” materials.

In December, newly elected School Board member Mark Wooster proposed what he termed a “more comprehensive” version of a state-mandated policy intended to allow parents to opt their children out of explicit materials.

The Virginia General Assem-

bly passed legislation in 2022 requiring school boards to adopt policies by Jan. 1 that are “consistent with” or “more comprehensive than” new Virginia Department of Education model

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policies, which require schools to provide parents at least 30 days' notice of using any explicit materials. The law defines "sexually explicit" to mean any "lewd exhibition of nudity," or any image or description of "sexual excitement, sexual conduct, sadomasochistic abuse, coprophilia, urophilia, bestiality or fetishism."

The School Board had voted in November, before Wooster took office, to incorporate the model policy language into an existing policy designated IIA. The latest version of IIA adopted on Thursday goes beyond parental notification and states the school system now "restricts the use of sexually explicit materials" for preschool through eighth grade.

An earlier draft of Wooster's Policy IIA changes, which went before the School Board for a first reading in January, had included a prohibition not only on "sexually explicit" materials but also any curriculum component deemed "inherently divisive." After the draft drew fierce opposition from students and teachers who condemned the move as censorship, Wooster and newly elected board member Jason Maresh agreed to strike the "inherently divisive" language from the Policy IIA draft and instead modify Policy INB, which deals with teaching controversial issues.

The draft Policy INB changes, which went to the School Board for a first reading on Thursday, would mandate teachers "not indoctrinate" students with "the belief that the United States, or any governmental entity within the nation, perpetuates systemic racism."

The change, however, didn't reassure Smithfield High School history and government teacher Matthew Ployd, who contended it would result in "a very whitewashed version of history and English" that "the authors of this amendment seem to desire from our schools."

"Who decides or determines what's indoctrination?" Ployd asked.

Matt Burgess, who teaches government and history courses at Windsor High School, contended the Policy INB changes would "name teachers as

the enemy."

"I am not a Marxist, I am not a fascist, I am not a groomer, I do not teach Critical Race Theory," Burgess said, referring to the college-level legal theory, often abbreviated CRT, which argues American laws and institutions have perpetuated inequalities among minorities.

The two educators were among the 11 speakers during the meeting's nearly 45-minute public comment period on agenda items, eight of whom spoke in opposition to the proposed Policy INB changes. Laura Fletcher, who described herself as being a "mother of white children," was among the speakers who urged the board to stay the course on policies IIA and INB.

"Mr. Maresh, Mr. Wooster, thank you for the courage you've shown in ... protecting our children from the mire of worldly perversions barreling down on them long before their hearts and minds are ready to carry these burdens," Fletcher said.

Wooster and Maresh, who each won their seats in November, had campaigned on platforms of opposition to "divisive" and "sexually explicit" materials. In 2021, Maresh and other parents took specific issue with Smithfield High School's "Read Woke" challenge, which encouraged students to read social justice-themed books available at the school's library.

Maresh, in a 2021 letter, contended the books "disparage white people as privileged, inherently racist, oppressors." Other parents had argued the books use of profanity and depictions of sex and rape were inappropriate for teenagers. The Read Woke challenge at Smithfield High has since ended, though the books remain available.

The adopted version of Policy IIA retains language added in November requiring the school system to maintain a list of instructional materials with sexually explicit content by grade and subject on its website. The list is available via a linked spreadsheet at https://www.iwcs.k12.va.us/apps/pages/parental_notification_instructional_materials.

To date, the only book added to the list is George

Orwell's dystopian novel "1984," which is taught in grades 9-12 advanced-placement and dual-enrollment English courses.

The adopted version of Policy IIA states dual-enrollment courses are "exempt" from the policy's restrictions since their content is controlled by the associated college offering the course, but doesn't state the same for advanced-placement courses.

Under the policy, parents may still request to view a course syllabus before enrolling their student in a dual-enrollment course, but "alternative assignments will not be provided."

DE and AP courses each offer high school students the opportunity to earn college credits. With AP courses, the college credit is contingent on a student taking and passing an end-of-semester standardized exam created by the College Board.

The College Board, which functions as the nationwide overseeing organization for AP courses, has stated on its website that if schools censor required topics from their AP courses, the board will remove the AP designation from the course and its inclusion in the AP course ledger provided to colleges and universities. Students and teachers had argued in January that this could jeopardize students' acceptance to colleges and any scholarships awarded.

Wooster, Maresh and Board Chairman John Collick cast the three votes

for the Policy IIA changes. Board members Denise Tynes and Michael Cunningham made no statements prior to casting their dissenting votes, but had each spoken in opposition to the Policy IIA changes at previous meetings.

Tynes, in January, contended the November version of Policy IIA had already allowed parents the option of reviewing and opting their children out of any content they find objectionable, without censoring the material for all students. Cunningham, in January, argued there

are already filters installed on school-issued iPads and other electronic devices, which are designed to filter content by age-appropriateness.

Tynes and Cunningham likewise objected to the proposed changes to Policy INB.

Maresh, however, pledged to "press forward with the spirit and intent of this policy" despite the pushback from teachers.

Maresh then equated the proposed restrictions on teaching controversial issues with an existing policy prohibiting teachers

from using or distributing illegal drugs.

"I'm confident sitting up here saying we don't have a teacher in Isle of Wight County Schools making drugs or selling them in the schools, but we've still got a policy. ... If you're not trying to promote, instruct or advance an idea of anything that may be perceived as controversial, then this is a non-issue," Maresh said.

The proposed changes to Policy INB will go for a second reading and will likely be voted upon at the board's March 9 meeting.



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IWCS bans teaching on ‘systemic racism’

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight County educators are now barred from teaching students about “systemic racism,” per a 3-2 School Board vote on March 9.

The vote changed the language of School Board Policy INB, which deals with teaching controversial

issues. The adopted changes now explicitly assert “there is no systemic racism or bigotry perpetuated by the United States or any governmental entity.”

The assertion is one of seven principles teachers are now mandated to follow when instructing students. The other six state:

Parents have the sole responsibility for guiding their children’s

views on controversial topics.

Life should be viewed without bias or discrimination toward any individual or group based on their characteristics or identities.

No one is inherently a victim or oppressed, consciously or unconsciously, due to their race, skin color, gender, religion, national origin sex, medical condition, age, marital status, sexual

orientation, gender identity, military status or disability.

A person’s value, success and moral character are not determined by their race, ethnicity or sex.

Socioeconomic or citizenship status does not make a person superior or inferior to others.

Employees of Isle of Wight County Schools shall not endorse

any political party, candidate or ideology in the performance of their duties.

The policy revision, put forward by board member Jason Maresh, is the latest iteration of efforts by the board’s new conservative majority to eliminate what they’ve called “divisive” content

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Racism

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from Isle of Wight County Schools' curriculum.

"I campaigned in large part for the premise behind this policy, it's no secret, and I was elected by 67% of voters in my district," Maresh said. "In Virginia, parents get a voice in how and what their children are exposed to."

The vote is among the latest to split along racial lines. Denise Tynes and Michael Cunningham, the board's two Black members, each opposed the policy change.

The seven principles are modeled off language in Gov. Glenn Youngkin's Executive Order No. 1, which mandated an end to "inherently divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory" in public schools. Critical Race Theory argues American laws and institutions have perpetuated inequalities among minorities.

Maresh and board member Mark Wooster had each made "divisive" materials a campaign issue when running for their seats last year. Maresh, prior to taking office, would frequently

use the public comment period at School Board meetings to argue that Isle of Wight County Schools was "indoctrinating" students with tenets of Critical Race Theory through equity initiatives and social justice-themed books. Board Chairman John Collick also made Critical Race Theory a campaign issue when he ran for his seat in 2021.

Wooster had introduced an earlier version of the policy change in December. At the time, he proposed expanding Isle of Wight County Schools' policy on "sexually explicit" materials to include a ban on anything deemed "inherently divisive."

Wooster's original proposal, which had taken language verbatim from Youngkin's order, drew fierce opposition in January from students and teachers who condemned the move as "censorship." Speakers returned on March 9 to oppose the latest iteration during an hour-plus public comment period.

Matthew Ployd, a Smithfield High School history teacher, called the listed

seven principles a "manifesto" rather than a policy.

"The only ones pushing a political agenda here in Isle of Wight are you, the board," Ployd said.

Asserting in a policy that there is no systemic racism in the United States "doesn't make it a fact," said Windsor High School history teacher Maggie Halstead, who contended the policy would result in students receiving a "narrow-minded and incomplete view on the world."

Jasmine Johnson, a Smithfield High School junior, told the board that with the policy in place, she would "no longer be proud" but "ashamed" to attend Isle of Wight County Schools.

None of the nine speakers who referenced Policy INB during the comment period reserved for agenda items said they supported the change. Tynes and Cunningham each cited the opposition for voting against the change.

"I heard them, I listened. ... I will continue to advocate for them," Tynes said.

Brewer endorsement didn't violate policy, School Board chair says

By **Stephen Faleski**
Staff Writer

A new School Board policy prohibiting employees of Isle of Wight County Schools from endorsing politicians doesn't preclude board members themselves from doing so, according to Board Chairman John Collick.

Collick, on March 9, defended his recent endorsement of a Republican state Senate candidate after speakers, during the meeting's public comment period, accused him and two other members of the board's conservative majority of being beholden to political interests.

Collick, who'd secured the endorsement of the county's Republican Party when he ran for his School Board seat in 2021, endorsed Del. Emily Brewer, R-Isle of Wight, a week prior to the meeting in her bid for the newly created Senate District 17. Collick contended on March 9 that he made the endorsement in his "personal capacity."

School Board Policy INB pertains to the teaching of controversial topics. Under revisions Collick, Vice Chairman Jason Maresh and board member Mark Wooster voted 3-2 to approve, Isle of Wight educators are now barred from teaching students

about "systemic racism" or endorsing "any political party, candidate or ideology in the performance of their duties."

"As a pastor, I would never tell my people, 'do as I say do, not as I do,'" said the Rev. Willie Williams.

Matt Ployd, a Smithfield High School teacher, contended the board would be in "immediate violation" of its own changes to Policy INB.

It's the "in the performance of their duties" part of the policy that's key to Collick.

"In our positions as School Board members, we do not discuss politics; in our personal lives, we can, just as our teachers can in their personal lives," Collick said, adding he would "continue" to do so in the future.

Brewer announced Collick's endorsement on March 2, issuing a press release identifying him as an Isle of Wight County School Board member.

"Emily supports the banning of teaching 'inherently divisive concepts' in Virginia schools and to prohibit biological boys from competing in girls' sports, particularly when scholarships are at stake," Collick said in Brewer's press release. "Emily's position is perfectly aligned with my own."

Collick, in 2021, had campaigned on a platform of opposition to transgender student policies and Critical Race Theory, which argues American laws and institutions have perpetuated inequalities among minorities.

According to Virginia Department of Education spokesman Charles Pyle, School Board members are not "employees" of their school divisions under Virginia law. School division staff, rather, are "employees of the board."

At the same meeting, board member Denise Tynes – who, along with Michael Cunningham voted to oppose the Policy INB changes – took issue with Maresh having accepted a non-monetary donation last fall from the Middle Resolution PAC, a political action committee that, according to its website, is "committed to identifying and electing qualified candidates who align with core conservative principles."

"When you start taking donations from private businesses and organizations ... and political PACs,



Collick

I do have a concern with that," Tynes said, contending such donations could result in organizations believing they "own" their donors.

"Nobody owns me," Collick objected.

Maresh, in a February statement to the Times, denied being swayed by the Middle Resolution donation, which consisted of design services for his campaign website.

"I've maintained conservative values and positions long before I decided to run for school board and long before Middle Resolution provided me with a donation in the form of web design services," Maresh said.

Wooster stated that as a civilian Navy firefighter and paramedic, he is covered under the Hatch Act, a federal law that prohibits certain federal employees from soliciting or accepting donations from partisan candidates or groups. The only contribution to Wooster's campaign marginally connected with a partisan candidate was a \$150 cash donation from Angie Sadler, wife of state Senate candidate Hermie Sadler, who's running against Brewer for the Republican nomination. The September donation was made nearly two months prior to Hermie Sadler's candidacy announcement.