

Editorial: The battle over books

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A Tennessee school board earned condemnation last month when it voted unanimously to remove the graphic novel “Maus,” a haunting depiction of the Holocaust, from the public school curriculum, citing its profanity and (mouse) nudity as being inappropriate for children.

“Maus” is a jarring read about the inhumanity of the Nazi era and the brutal reality of an effort to eradicate the Jewish people in Europe. A winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, it provides a clear and unflinching view of that horror.

Removing it from the school curriculum serves as the latest example of a worrisome national trend to limit students’ access to books that have a whiff of controversy. It is a trend very much alive in Virginia, though that’s not a place the commonwealth should want to be.

In October, Glenn Youngkin, then the Republican candidate for governor, advanced his campaign’s emphasis on giving parents more control over public education through an advertisement about Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel, “Beloved.”

It featured a conservative activist who pushed to have her local school board remove the book from her son’s English class, saying its graphic depiction of slavery gave her child nightmares. When the school board declined, she advocated for legislation that would empower parents with more control over the books taught in schools.

Then-Gov. Terry McAuliffe vetoed the bill, which Youngkin used as a campaign point. McAuliffe, running for a second term as governor last year, handed out copies of “Beloved” at a campaign rally prior to the November election, which Youngkin won.

That battle flared up in Virginia Beach as well. In October, two school board members called on administrators to remove six books from school libraries in that community, including “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison, “Lawn Boy” by Jonathan Evison, and “A Lesson Before Dying” by Ernest Gaines.

A subsequent meeting saw about a dozen students speak in favor of the books and the importance of having representation of historically marginalized voices in the literature discussed in the classroom. They noted the books “depict real-world, albeit disturbing, experiences young people face,” according to Pilot reporting.

But emboldened by November’s election results, Republican state lawmakers resurrected the parental-consent bill this year.

Virginia Beach Sen. Bill DeSteph sponsored legislation that would require school boards to involve parents in the selection and evaluation of material available in school libraries, require

parental consent before a child could check out controversial material, and remove material considered “sexually explicit.”

In each of these instances, those working to remove material from public schools insist they aren't trying to “ban” books and defend against accusations of censorship. That's what censors always say and, in this case, there's no better way to describe it.

While it's true that not all material is appropriate for every grade level, these challenging works of literature are vital to a well-rounded education. We should want children to face ideas that are difficult and trust their capacity for critical thinking, a cornerstone of education and, ultimately, democracy.

As the students speaking at the Beach school board meeting said, some of the events described in these novels are real-world situations that children will experience. As much as we'd like to shield them from the dangers of the world, we cannot. Our best hope is to prepare them for life beyond the schoolroom and equip them with the intellectual capacity to make smart decisions.

These are tough conversations and school boards should invite parents into the conversation about what's appropriate. But that does not mean allowing a few loud voices to determine for all what should and should not be taught. That's a treacherous path and it leads to antiseptic classrooms that do not challenge students — and to students who seek out this material on their own, without the benefit of a teacher to provide guidance.

DeSteph's bill failed this week, but it won't be the last time Virginia wrestles with this issue. And it means the voices who speak up for inclusion and challenging subject matter must remain vigilant against those who seek to diminish both.