

Opinion

The Wilson Times

WILSON'S 24/7 NEWS SOURCE IN PRINT AND ONLINE

MORE THAN A NEWSPAPER — A COMMUNITY INSTITUTION SINCE 1896

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Corey Friedman EDITOR
Lisa Boykin Batts ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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THOUGHT FOR TODAY

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11)

PRAYER: Dear Father, help us to trust that you know where we need to be. Grant us patience with your timing. Amen.

IN OUR OPINION

'Movie ratings for books' belong on cutting-room floor

An advocacy group concerned about sexual content in school library books says it wants to empower Wilson County parents. So why does it have its heart set on outsourcing parental oversight to a censorship committee or to school officials it already mistrusts?

Three Wilson Partners in Education members addressed the school board during its Monday meeting. Two speakers, Sarah Ridder and Lindsay Cookson, repeated a previous pitch: Rate books like Hollywood blockbusters.

"We request immediate action to establish a rating system," Ridder said. "Because families lead busy lives, we base our system on the film rating scale, which is already familiar to most people. We propose that only books known to the school libraries and administration to be sexually explicit or those red-flagged by the community be, at this time, rated to reduce the administrative burden. We offered to form a ratings committee of parents and community members."

The Motion Picture Association of America assigns the ratings G, PG, PG-13, R and NC-17 to help parents choose age-appropriate family flicks. The MPAA's Classification and Rating Administration screens movies on a sliding fee scale, from \$750 for a short film to \$25,000 for feature-length submissions with production budgets north of \$75 million.

Movie ratings are a voluntary, private-sector service. No state or federal law requires studios to obtain an MPAA rating in order to show a film in theaters, as the First Amendment forbids onerous government regulation of expressive content. The five alphanumeric ratings are registered trademarks, so even if Wilson County Schools were so inclined, the district couldn't label library books "PG-13" without committing intellectual property theft.

Ridder said only books known to be explicit and those that generate complaints would be reviewed, which dilutes her classification concept to the point of meaninglessness. If a school rates 5% of the books in its library, singling out that small proportion will train parents to trust ratings only in their absence.

Is all this hubbub really about giving parents unsolicited advice that many will ignore? We fear the group could lobby school officials to enforce its preferences by confiscating books from students, refusing to loan them out or reshelving them in a restricted-access section.

Ridder wants community members to pass judgment. If established as a school board advisory committee, such a panel would be a public body required to follow state open meetings and public records laws. Operating as a government entity may pose legal hurdles to rating books on subjective, viewpoint-based criteria.

In an Aug. 4 email to school board members, Partners in Education's leadership team claimed that banning books wasn't among the group's goals. But in her remarks this week, Cookson said books that contain vulgar language are tantamount to "pornography in schools" and asked the board to explain "the reason for your lack of cooperation to remove it."

Either the group went back on its word or it's willfully ignorant of what constitutes a book ban. Neither explanation inspires confidence.

"Book banning, a form of censorship, occurs when private individuals, government officials or organizations remove books from libraries, school reading lists or bookstore shelves because they object to their content, ideas or themes," university librarian Susan L. Webb writes in the digital First Amendment Encyclopedia.

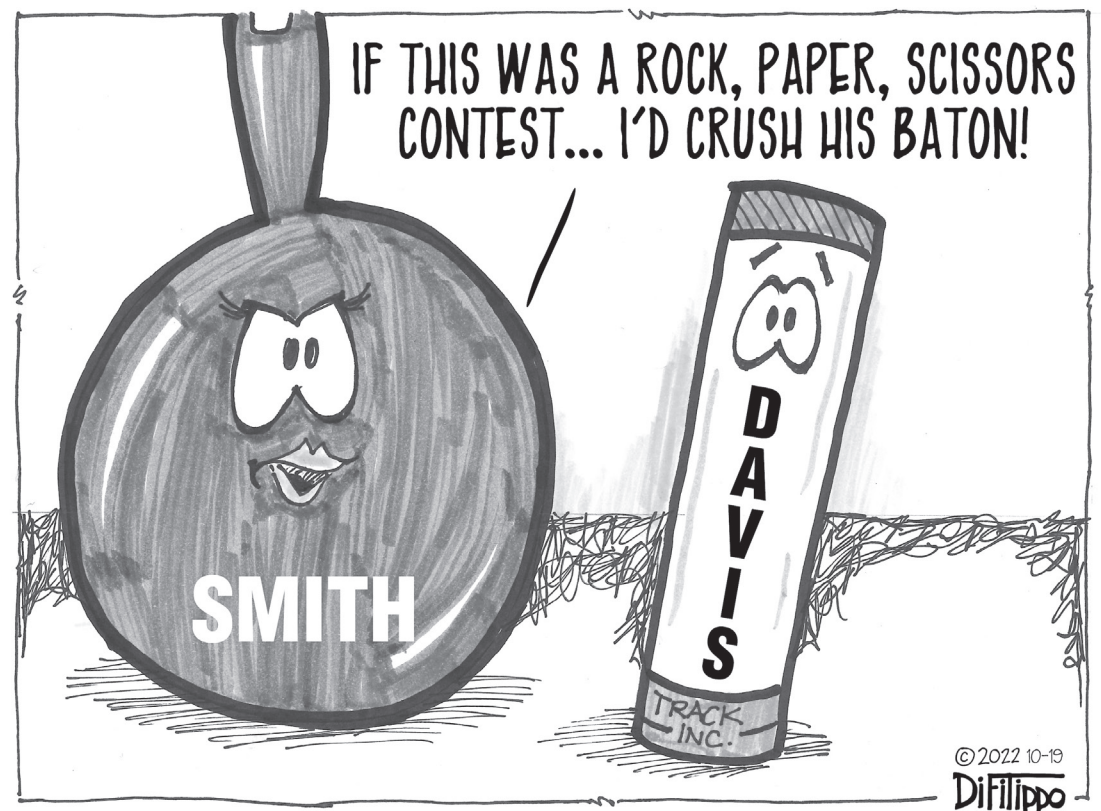
The school board has been reluctant to engage with Partners in Education, instead referring its requests to Superintendent Lane Mills' staff for follow-up. District 7 representative Rhyan Breen rebuffed the group's concerns in a meeting recap posted to his "Breen for School Board - District 7" Facebook page, writing that Wilson parents are capable of monitoring their kids' reading habits without PIE presuming to speak for them.

"It presupposes that parents lack the ability to actually parent their children," Breen wrote. "I don't believe in that."

A father of two Wilson County Schools students, Breen said the moral panic over young adult literature is greatly exaggerated. Watch out for folks who think they can supervise your kids better than you can — they might have ulterior motives.

"Utilizing a website to flag passages and books in our school system as a basis to assert that the school system is actively undermining parents, sexualizing children and eroding their moral compass is a fantasy propounded by those seeking ultimate control of thought and ideology," he wrote.

Hanlon's razor cautions against attributing malice to the merely misguided. If Wilson Partners in Education continues cheerleading for censorship and equating every mention of teen sexuality with hardcore pornography, however, Breen's words will prove prescient.



LETTERS

Breen insults Partners in Education's mission, motives

Parents and community members, visit www.facebook.com/breenfordistrict7 to see how your elected school board representative, Rhyan Breen, responds on his public Breen for School Board page when concerned parents and grandparents flag sexually graphic material like "Me, Earl and the Dying Girl," "Looking for Alaska" and "Last Night at the Telegraph Club."

At the school board meeting on Monday, Wilson, N.C., Partners in Education voiced reasonable concerns about graphic sexual content in educational resources and requested a ratings system to inform and empower parents.

Mr. Breen's statement is so disorganized that we have difficulty knowing exactly what he is arguing for or against.

Our requests are reasonable, clear and consistent: first, for transparency so parents know what is available to their students in libraries and private classrooms without having to vet each book; second, for a ratings system to help parents avoid material that contradicts their families' ethics. We believe the family is the ultimate authority in teaching moral, sexual and ethical values.

Is this how an elected official should respond to parents' sincere concerns about graphic sexual content being presented to minors in a public school? That these parents are, in effect, delusional?

What we do know is that the "p---- eating" scene in "Me, Earl and the Dying Girl" or the explicit sex scenes between minor boys in "Darius the Great Deserves Better" are not "fantasies" that we are concocting.

We asked the school board to defend the academic merit of such works. If there is academic merit, then expose such books to public scrutiny and defend them.

We ask to be able to opt out. To opt out, you have to know what is there. Consequently, we proposed a ratings system and notification of when a book is checked out electronically or physically.

We urge the adoption of transparency in moral and ethical matters that go beyond the academic "three R's," and that should best be left to parents to teach according to their families' values.

If Mr. Breen insists on keeping sexually explicit material available to minors in schools even when we object, is he not the one forcing the acceptance of his own ideology and thought control?

Mr. Breen shows his true face: he is not open to reasonable discussion of graphic sex in educational resources and insults the motivation of parents and community members who object to the deliberate presentation of such material to minors in our schools.

Sarah Ridder
MIDDLESEX

Sue Glisson
ELM CITY

Jane Cookson
WILSON

Chuck Baio
WILSON

Vonda Goff
ELM CITY

Brenda Enders
WILSON

The writers are members of the Wilson Partners in Education leadership team.

Powell a woman of principle on school board

I am writing to express my support for Ms. Debora Powell in her efforts to be re-elected to the Wilson County Board of Education in District 1.

As a student advocate, Ms. Powell has consistently worked to ensure that all students are afforded the opportunity to pursue their educational ambitions regardless of their life's challenges.

During her tenure as a member of the Board of Education, Ms. Powell has engaged in several Wilson County Schools-sponsored programs, events and initiatives including Her PRIDE, which stands for Positivity, Respect, Intelligence, Determination and Excellence. This program, begun in 2016, was created with the goal of building girls' self-esteem and confidence.

Prior to becoming a member of the school board, she worked for Wilson County Schools as an exceptional children's teacher, subsequently retiring after more than 30 years of dedicated service.

Over the many years that I have known her, Ms. Powell has remained a woman of principle, strong moral convictions and a willingness to work collegially to achieve what's best for students, their families and our community.

I hope you will agree that Debora Powell has earned your vote, and as a result, you will return her to the Wilson County Board of Education as the representative for District 1.

The Rev. H. Maurice Barnes
WILSON

Career politicians' distorted realities

Typically, I attempt to give elected officials the benefit of the doubt in their comments. I do know that words can be twisted in order to sell papers. However, that is not the case with Rep. G.K. Butterfield's recent comments ("Butterfield: GOP embarrasses US on world stage," front page, Oct. 11).

First, let me begin by saying that both Democrats and Republicans are sick of elected officials creating their "own truth" and offering solutions that demonize half of our nation.

Next, what's embarrassing our nation is our inconsistent policies. First, we allow the 462nd-ranked swimmer in the men's division to become the No. 1 swimmer in the women's division because he "identified" as a "woman." Also, we call ourselves a nation of immigrants, but we expel Cubans and Venezuelans back to their communist countries. Perhaps we don't want to offend dictators and totalitarians.

Rep. Butterfield, now that it's the midterms, wants to sell Americans suffering from record inflation on economic policies that have never and will never exist under his party. For example, I know a man who has lost more than \$50,000 in his retirement account because of the tax changes in the so-called "Inflation Reduction Act." And to make matters worse, Rep. Butterfield wants to sell Americans on jobs neither he or his party have provided, economic relief we haven't seen and policies that are supposed to bring both about.

A cursory examination of our national news will reflect that the his party has focused on denying that there is a border issue; ostracizing Joe Manchin, Krysten Sinema and Tulsi Gabbard; pushing for transgender rights at the expense of biological women; dividing our nation with critical race theory; and selling government pork barrel waste under the guise of a supposed Green New Deal. Lastly, the politicians of "defund the police" and "Black Lives Matter" are quietly ignoring the record level of homicides in cities where their policies took effect.

When far-left liberal candidates are ousted this November, it will be because the majority of Americans reject the distorted realities offered by career politicians and embrace the truths evident to us all.

Ken Fontenet
WILSON

The writer is pastor of Door of Life Christian Church and the Republican candidate for N.C. House District 24.

Tell us what's on your mind

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The Wilson Times P.O. Box 2447, Wilson, N.C. 27894

E-mail letters@wilsontimes.com