

I do not take our mission statement lightly – one team, one goal, student success. It seems like a simple declaration, one so incredibly obvious that it should be at the heart of what every school district seeks to do. Put student learning first. And the values of that mission are demonstrated by results consistently showing Cobb is already and assuredly the best place to teach, lead, and learn – and we will continue to be exactly that.

We have a unique responsibility to Cobb's families, who, by law, are required to place their children in the care and custody of our schools approximately 180 days a year. Along with the privilege of educating our students, we have an obligation to respect their families, cultures, and backgrounds. We must acknowledge and respect the choices some make, even if they may not be the choices others would make. Parents have a right to expect that when their child becomes a student, and they are required to entrust them to our schools, we will make every effort to keep them safe.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with our mission statement or those sentiments. There are those who believe Cobb's schools are nothing more than a convenient battlefield for whatever their political cause. And that is what we are currently experiencing. And unfortunately, one of the first casualties is common sense. Our students, parents, team members, and community members have been bombarded with social media information that is almost entirely inaccurate. Some of this language is, in my opinion, absolutely calculated to frighten and disrupt. It is truly appalling, but we have radical organizations and politicians who are using these inaccurate fear-mongering tactics to scare and mislead the public solely for the purpose of fund-raising within, but particularly outside, Cobb County.

Hopefully, my remarks this evening will bring some clarification and common sense to the issue. And most definitely, without ambiguity. First, the Helen Ruffin Reading Bowl. The reading bowl was never canceled nor put on hold by the District. No employee is or was being threatened with termination or even discipline for participating in the reading bowl. There has always been a parent permission form required for each student choosing to participate in the reading bowl. Two District employees chose to exit their volunteer positions working on the reading bowl. Unfortunately, an email containing inaccurate information was sent to other volunteers throughout the District. This email was corrected once central office supervisors became involved. However, social media and some individuals still chose to propagate the wildly inaccurate information, causing further confusion. Bluntly, those individuals are doing nothing more than engaging in fear-mongering and are completely irresponsible in their actions and statements.

Secondly, the school book fair. Book fairs have not been canceled nor put on hold. Vetting processes have been communicated to schools for material that will be a part of the book fair. Book fairs have always been up to the individual school whether or not they will be held and what companies they will work with. However, we will be looking into the companies with which the District will be working with to conduct future book fairs, ensuring those companies agree to follow and abide by the District's policies and State law. The number of awards given

to any book cannot be assumed to mean that those books are absent of lewd, vulgar, sexually explicit, obscene, or pornographic material and appropriate for our schools.

The Cobb County School District is not engaging in book banning or book burning. We are not coming after the jobs of teachers or media specialists. We are not enforcing radical new policies and practices. We are not going rogue and refusing to follow our own policies. We are following well-established federal and state law and policies and practices of the District that have been with us for years, if not decades. We are not usurping the rights of parents to make key decisions regarding the upbringing and education of their children.

The idea that we are “book banning” because of a particular viewpoint is simply not true. The District’s media centers include – and will continue to include – books and other assets from a multitude of perspectives, cultures, and experiences. Our students will continue to be exposed to a vast array of diversity experiences, backgrounds, attitudes, and beliefs. Instruction in the District is built around the Georgia state standards, not any individual or group’s political agenda. Cultural, historical, experiential, and viewpoint diversity are incorporated throughout the Georgia standards.

We are not introducing new policies or practices. Long before last year, the District had a legal and moral obligation to keep students safe when their parents entrust them to us during the school day. This includes protecting them from exposure to sexually explicit, obscene, pornographic, vulgar, and lewd materials. The law has long held that the unique custodial and instructional mission of schools explicitly impose this obligation. In 1986, the United States Supreme Court supported a school district disciplining a high school student for using lewd and vulgar language during a speech at school, declaring “vulgar speech and lewd conduct is wholly inconsistent with the fundamental values of a public school education.” Despite what politicians and social media are saying, this has consistently been the law in this state for over fifty years. The “radical new idea” is not that schools have an obligation to protect students, but the radical new idea is that all children should somehow be forced to encounter sexually explicit language and instruction while at school – an assertion that less than five years ago would have seemed ridiculous and dangerous, and one that the vast majority of educators and parents continue to find ridiculous and dangerous.

I am also aware that those promoting this radical new idea that children should be exposed to lewd, vulgar, and sexually explicit material are contending this removal somehow violates our Board policy on book reviews. That is not true. Yes, we have a policy for parents to challenge materials they believe are inappropriate. However, as professional educators, we have an independent professional obligation to protect students from lewd and vulgar materials regardless of whether any parent, group, or outside entity files a complaint. It is both legally recognized and completely independent of our processes for handling parental and external complaints.

As I previously stated, in this instance, when the District was made aware of inappropriate content contained in two books, we conducted a review of both books. That review demonstrated conclusively that the degree of sexually explicit, obscene, vulgar, and/or lewd material in these books required them to be removed immediately. As Superintendent, my professional obligation to protect our students is independent of anyone else's. As superintendent, after I knew what was in these books, I could not attempt to shift responsibility to other district employees or hide behind an allegation that, "Well, no parent has complained, so my hands are tied." As the superintendent of the Cobb County School District, it is not usurping the Board's authority to do my job and execute my professional and moral obligation to protect Cobb's students from being exposed to vulgar, lewd, sexually explicit, obscene, and pornographic materials.

So, if you need someone to blame for deciding to remove the books "Flamer" and "Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl," you can blame me. Despite what is being misrepresented on social media by political activists, politicians, and interest groups – these books were not pulled from our media centers in a casual way. We reviewed the books. I encourage everyone opposing our action to review them as well to see what is actually within the books. Our review immediately demonstrated the books contained content so vulgar and sexually explicit that it has no place in a public school media center. If a public commenter wished to read this content aloud in this meeting, we would stop the broadcast because the Federal Communications Commission would classify the language in them as indecent and impermissible for us to broadcast. They contain grossly offensive and sexually explicit content, that if a student uttered these statements to another student, there would undoubtedly be an outcry to suspend or expel the offending student.

These are not stray remarks but central themes of the books. For example. "Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl" is a little more than 300 pages long. There are approximately 300 instances of profane language – language that if a student in this district used in school, it would subject him or her to discipline under our Code of Conduct. It contains a multi-page graphic depiction of oral sex. "Flamer" is a graphic novel, so the indecent and highly sexual language is accompanied by illustrations, including those of nude children. Again, if you do not think there is a problem with students having unrestricted access to these books in a school media center, you are wrong, and hopefully, you do not know what is actually contained in these books.

Since these two books were pulled, some media outlets highlighted the Fulton County School District, removing two different books. It was determined that one of those books was in only one of our media centers. After conducting a review, we discovered it, too, contained multiple instances of lewd and vulgar content and is no longer in that media center. Again, it does not matter the method of becoming aware of vulgar, lewd, sexually explicit, or pornographic material being present – it matters what action is taken. The Cobb County School District will not knowingly allow this material to be accessed by children in this District.

Family choice – one lying well within what the US Supreme Court recognizes as one of our oldest and most fundamental rights as Americans – the right to raise our own children. Generally, as parents, you can expose your children to ideas and beliefs you may hold at whatever age you please. If you choose to do so, you can allow your elementary-aged children to watch rated “R” films in your home. You can allow your children unrestricted access to the Internet when public schools must abide by CIPA – the Children’s Internet Protection Act, which is federal legislation requiring school districts to filter Internet access for children. Other parents also have these rights and may make different choices, and their rights to raise their children are not less than anyone else’s. However, as educators, the state holds us responsible for educating all students and ensuring we do our best not to make those choices for any parent. Again, if you choose to allow your children to access sexually explicit, obscene, or pornographic material while in your house under your supervision – that is your decision. I, as superintendent, will not knowingly allow children in the Cobb County School District to access lewd, vulgar, sexually explicit, obscene, or pornographic material. Let me be clear: anyone working in education who knowingly provided students with access to sexually explicit, obscene, or pornographic materials should not be in a position of educating other parents’ children.

We are also not prohibiting educators from incorporating non-District-provided materials in their instruction. Educators who follow well-established CCSD board policy will continue to have the ability to introduce supplemental materials to the District’s classrooms. However, that ability must be balanced against our responsibility to ensure a reasonable educator would find them useful, aligned to our instructional standards, and appropriate for both the child and the lesson. We are not creating an environment in which teachers should be in fear that utilizing supplemental resources could somehow cost them their jobs. Every teacher will continue to have the ability to request that we expand our District-approved resources to incorporate new materials. Every teacher will still have the ability to seek the guidance of his or her principal on whether non-District materials are appropriate for use in his or her classroom. Not a single media specialist is going to lose his or her job simply because the school media center he or she supervises inadvertently contained books with age-inappropriate lewd, vulgar, and/or sexually explicit content. Again, none of that was ever legitimately in question.

I do not want our parents and community members to think, for a moment, that Cobb educators believe your children should “read anything they want” or have access to anything they want. I have heard from a number of Cobb educators who are just as outraged – if not more so - than parents. I genuinely believe they express the same sentiment of the vast majority of Cobb’s educators who are dedicating their lives to the education of your children. However, as you might expect in a district with over 19,000 employees, we do occasionally have one or two people who assert they know better than the elected board, the District’s administrators, and parents and may act on their own judgment rather than following clear policy. Fortunately, they seldom remain with us. I want to assure you that if we do have employees who lack the judgment and commitment of a reasonable Cobb educator and who

are actively working to intentionally ensure your children have unsupervised access to vulgar, sexually explicit, lewd, obscene, or pornographic materials in violation of this Board's policies, we will continue to treat those actions as insubordination and apply the appropriate level of discipline.

We are going to continue to review the books we currently have in our media centers, and we will remove books containing sexually explicit, obscene, or pornographic material. We will also ensure that companies adhere to Board policies and State law in order to do business with this District when purchasing books.

I want to be very clear in closing. This situation is not over. This situation is not about politics. This situation is not about faith-based or religious beliefs. This situation is about right and wrong, good and evil. This sexualization of children can never be defended nor allowed in any context, but especially in education. There is no middle ground in this situation. There is no room to flip-flop on where you stand – you are either in favor of providing inappropriate material to children or you are against it.

I assure you – I am against it, and I will not be moved.