

**NATIONAL
COALITION
AGAINST
CENSORSHIP** **KIDS'
RIGHT
TO READ**

August 15, 2023

Director McKenzie Snow
Iowa State Department of Education
400 E 14th Street
Des Moines, IA 50319-0146

Dear Director McKenzie Snow,

The National Coalition Against Censorship is an alliance of nonprofit groups dedicated to protecting freedom of expression, including the rights of K-12 students, teachers, and staff. We are writing to urge you to issue guidance regarding Senate File 496, which is creating confusion among Iowa school districts and is thereby harming students.

Senate File 496 adds Section 279.80 to the Education and Cultural Affairs Code which states that "A school district shall not provide any program, curriculum, test, survey, questionnaire, promotion, or instruction relating to gender identity or sexual orientation to students in kindergarten through grade six." It also amends the Education and Cultural Affairs Code to exclude from school libraries and classrooms any material that includes "descriptions or visual depictions of a sex act."

We are writing because it appears that Iowa school districts are confused about how to implement this new law. In Urbandale Community School district, the ambiguity of the code initially led the school district to assemble a list of nearly 400 books which they believe violated the code. Following community complaints that the district was misinterpreting the law, the administration backtracked and reduced the list to 64 books. Similarly, the Superintendent of Norwalk Public Schools also expressed confusion, "In 20-some years as a public school administrator in Iowa, individual school districts haven't been faced with this challenge with very little guidance from the Department of Education."

Indeed, media reports indicate that even the Iowa State Board of Education president John Robbins acknowledged that "There's a lot of confusion, people in the field that I've talked to are looking at the (department) or somebody to provide directions," he said. "Because right now people are kind of either guessing what is right or wrong, and not being in violation of the law."

This confusion is harmful to students because it encourages schools to err on the side of caution and unnecessarily remove books that are valuable to students. According to the *Iowa Gazette*, the Urban Education Network and the Rural School Advocates of Iowa told the state board that "a lack of clear standards would lead to school districts interpreting the law in the most broad sense in order to avoid being penalized, and that

would lead to unnecessary books being removed." Similarly, an Urbandale school board member has stated, "school districts are fearful and they're putting out lists that are exhaustive and possibly exceed the scope of Senate File 496."

Therefore, we urge you to clarify the scope of these provisions in SF 496.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Christopher Finan
Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

Co-signed by: American Booksellers for Free Expression
The Authors Guild
Children's and Young Adult Books Committee, PEN America
National Council of Teachers of English
PEN America
Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

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