

Kristin Benton – Testimony for 2/23/22 Criminal Justice Subcommittee
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My name is Kristin Benton and I am the mom of two daughters that attend Williamson County Schools. Last year, I began hearing about pornographic materials in school libraries across the country. And like any parent who takes their role seriously, I needed to know if the schools that I trust my children with each day, contained these same obscenities- books whose content serves no educational purpose and in any other setting are clear cut violations of Title 39.

So, I went to work researching books that meet Title 39 definitions of obscenity. I combed through the school card catalogs. Title after title kept showing up in our school libraries. I was in shock. How could our schools, in good conscience, be ok with this? I realized there are only two answers to that question: either they don't know or they don't care.

Assuming innocent intent, I gathered parent volunteers to bring awareness to the School Board and, at the November Board meeting, 6 parents, including myself, read excerpts from books that exist in multiple school libraries in Williamson County and across the state. What we read was deemed so obscene that they MUTED the live, online feed of the meeting so those watching at home could not hear what was read. I submitted a handout prior to this morning that each of you should have – it is the same handout I provided to the School Board and contains the texts we read aloud as well as other titles containing obscenity in school libraries throughout the state.

As you review the handout, consider this: Notorious serial killer, Ted Bundy said that pornography played a key role in his violence, that it “fueled his fantasy life.” In his final interview, he cautioned about the danger of pornography and graphic violence – and how it can impact “unattended or unaware children that have vulnerabilities to become a ‘Ted Bundy.’” Even one of the most violent serial killers of all time, cautioned against exposure to pornography and its role in fostering depravity. Yet, school districts across the state are making obscene content available to those most vulnerable to its influence and corruption. This isn't about banning books, and it goes beyond the loss of innocence. It's about being mindful of what is fed to impressionable young minds.

After the board meeting, I was optimistic: Surely, now that they ARE aware - and they deemed the books obscene enough to mute the live feed, they will consider how their 15 or 16 year old self would be impacted reading those same words and take quick action to remove those books from our libraries. Not so. It's been 3 months and the district has made no effort to investigate the book titles that I provided them, and further, said parents must pursue the very tedious and lengthy 4.403 Textbook Review process for an opportunity to have titles reviewed. Again, we are talking about library books- a problem that could be solved with a simple emailed directive to all the district's librarians. Yet, they are taking no responsibility or initiative to protect our children.

THIS is why HB1944 is so important. You have the opportunity to place guardrails that protect our children in the setting where parents most trust them to be safe and protected – their school. You have the opportunity to prevent and hold schools accountable for breaking the laws that protect the most innocent and precious of our population – our children. On behalf of the parents of children across the great state of Tennessee, I ask you to please vote YES on HB1944.