

Is the School Library Safe?

A roiling controversy in Arkansas may serve to awaken many parents to the reality of what is found in many public school libraries—explicitly sexual material. This controversy centers in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where Laurie Taylor, a mother of two young teenage girls, complained to the local board of education about three library books that contained explicit descriptions and depictions of sexual activity. Predictably, national library associations and anti-censorship groups quickly jumped into the fray, charging Mrs. Taylor with launching a crusade to take the Arkansas public schools back to the dark ages.

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In response to her concerns, the Fayetteville Board of Education first decided to move the three books in question into a special parents-only section of the school libraries. Nevertheless, the board later rescinded that decision and, by a one-vote margin, decided to return the books to the main collection where they would be accessible to students.

This particular controversy tells us a great deal about how much influence parents can wield over local school boards and the administration of the schools. In a nutshell, this case proves that, even in the heartland of America, parents are denied much influence at all.

I do not know Laurie Taylor, but a quick visit to her organization's web site should be enough to raise the temperature of any concerned parent. The three books of her immediate concern, *It's So Amazing*, *It's Perfectly Normal*, and *The Teenage Guy's Survival Guide*, contain hair-raising material. *It's So Amazing*, intended for children in kindergarten through the fourth grade, deals with a wide range of sexual issues. *It's Perfectly Normal*, designed for third through sixth graders, includes cartoon drawings of a couple having sex, of homosexual relationships, and of a boy masturbating. Those readers that require proof of this content can simply visit the group's [web site](#).

The Teenage Guy's Survival Guide encourages the use of pornography as “natural and fine.” Backward parents who think otherwise will find themselves isolated by the liberal elite and attacked by advocates for libraries and librarians, who seem to have no concern for what parents believe to be appropriate for their children.

The Little Rock newspaper, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, editorialized against Laurie Taylor's crusade. Referring to the excerpts from offensive books Mrs. Taylor and her group assembled, the paper responded: “They can be shocking. And often on the basis of those inflammatory excerpts, she's rallied support from others with concerns that mirror hers. In the name of protecting her kids from books she finds distasteful, she's unavoidably created obstacles for others who don't feel the way she does.” The paper went on to accuse Mrs. Taylor of seeking to ban books and argued that her effort amounts to a form of unconstitutional censorship.

When Mrs. Taylor suggested that parents might decide to “opt out” their children from school libraries, the paper described her proposal as “a curious way to approach education, preventing your kids from using the school library.”

One might think that the newspaper would be more concerned with the use of a school library as an environment for indoctrinating children into the sexual revolution. The Little Rock paper suggested that the school district should simply “flag each student’s record with parental restrictions on what books their own kids can check out.” In other words, parents could decide that they could prevent their children from checking out a specific list of books. Of course, nothing would prevent the children from gaining access to the books while in the library.

Undoubtedly, some persons would assume that this is all about sex education in general. But the books Laurie Taylor and her team have listed are, in the main, not about biology and the “birds and the bees.” To the contrary, the books she lists are among some of the most explicit and pornographic to be found anywhere in literature.

Many parents are simply unaware that the category of literature now known as “young adult fiction” is filled with some of the most graphic sexuality to be found in contemporary literature. Many of the titles normalize homosexuality and describe homosexual acts while others cover issues ranging from incest to sexual abuse and matters of heterosexual technique.

Some would undoubtedly be surprised to learn that this controversy is localized in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Nevertheless, as reporter George Archibald of *The Washington Times* explains, Fayetteville, the home of the University of Arkansas, is marked by “the self-consciously liberal instincts of a college town” but is “surrounded by a conservative, church-going county in the heart of the Bible Belt.”

Bobby C. New, the superintendent of Fayetteville’s public schools, went so far as to describe the parents’ effort to identify sexually explicit books as “almost a cancer that grows within the total body of our school district.” Even as he pledged to work with the parents on the issue, he insisted that librarians must make the final decisions. “I will defend our librarians to the bitter end,” he said. “They are professional, trained, serious [teachers] who totally, totally have a process of reviewing everything that is ordered, to include reviewing critics, national critics that have been identified by the American Library Association as being credible.” [sic]

Therein lies the problem. The American Library Association is hardly a disinterested party to this controversy. As a matter of fact, the ALA takes predictably liberal positions on almost every issue, especially when it comes to matters of pornography and censorship. The ALA steadfastly opposes the use of any internet filters, arguing that such mechanisms represent an unconstitutional form of censorship. The ALA and its associated groups have opposed laws that would protect children from access to sexually explicit material and pornography.

In a June 24, 2005 editorial, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* celebrated the fact that the National Coalition Against Censorship had written a letter to Superintendent New, urging him to resist the efforts of Laurie Taylor and other concerned parents. According to the paper, the NCAC’s letter was “so unspeakably reasonable that it should be required reading.” With arrogant condescension, the paper continued: “But that would probably bring another objection from the would-be censors, who keep finding more reading material they want kept from impressionable kids. The coalition’s arguments against hiding books from the kids makes so much sense they would probably scare the aginners [i.e., people *against* something] as much as any of those books do.”

The paper argued that parents should not be making decisions about which books should be available in public school libraries. “The coalition says the decision about what books belong in a school library is the proper job for librarians and teachers who work with kids. And who should not be making such judgments? Individual parents. That’s right, the parents shouldn’t be making these decisions. Hold your outrage, mom and dad. Listen to the coalition: ‘Parents may be equipped to make reading choices for their own children, but, no matter how well-intentioned, they simply are not equipped to make decisions that address the needs of the entire district’s student body.’”

In other words, the paper told the parents to back off and go back home where they belong. According to the editors, “We trust the teachers, teachers’ aides, librarians, principals, and even school boards and superintendents to do what’s right by all the kids.”

That kind of condescension—not to mention liberal arrogance—and the decision by the Fayetteville school board suggests why so many parents are withdrawing their children from the public schools and choosing other options.

While the newspaper's editors are waxing poetic against the dangers of censorship and celebrating the NCAC's open letter to superintendent New, perhaps they should actually make a visit to the NCAC Web site. There they would find a white paper entitled "Identifying What Is Harmful or Inappropriate for Minors." That paper, written by Marjorie Hines, director of the NCAC's "Free Expression Policy Project," claims: "Experts in human sexuality agree that there is no body of scientific evidence establishing that minors are harmed by reading or viewing pornography."

Later, the same paper asserts: "Correlations do not establish causation, but they can be suggestive. Studies have found, for example, an *inverse correlation* between youthful exposure to pornography and sex offending among adolescents and adults. That is, sex offenders generally have less, not more, exposure to pornography as youths. One possible inference is that sex offending is causally related not to youthful exposure to sexually explicit material but to its opposite: youthful repression, conflict, and guilt."

Let's see the editors of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* cite that passage in an editorial. The NCAC has published a paper suggesting the "possible inference" that shielding adolescent males from explicit pornography can actually lead to "sex offending."

At least one of the paper's columnists, Mike Masterson, had the courage to defend Laurie Taylor. Noting the hatred directed at Mrs. Taylor, Masterson observed, "Her offense? Being a concerned local parent who politely took to the stage to plead for a community with divergent views to unite to mastermind an enlightened plan where each parent's desires for his or her own child's development could be met."

Masterson also informed his readers that it was Laurie Taylor who had asked the Fayetteville school district why Christmas had been left off of the 2004 elementary public school calendar, while Kwanzaa, Ramadan, and Hanukkah were listed. According to Masterson, Mrs. Taylor had even offered to pay for the reprinting of new calendars which would have listed Christmas Day. As he reported, the district's reply was, "No sale."

Many Americans would undoubtedly be shocked to observe that Fayetteville, at least as represented by a majority of its school board and a large number of its politically active citizens, is turning itself into something of a Berkeley in the Ozarks. This controversy should alert parents to look closely at the materials available in their own local school libraries. If you still question what is at stake, simply visit the Parents Protecting the Minds of Children web site. So much for trusting "professionals" to make these decisions for our children.

