



Written by [James Murphy](#) on March 5, 2022

New Legislation Gives Virginia Parents the Right to Review and Opt Out of Sexually Explicit Lessons

Legislation requiring Virginia schools to notify parents in advance when sexually explicit material will be taught in class has passed both chambers of the state's General Assembly, and is now on Governor Glenn Youngkin's desk awaiting his signature. Bill number [SB 656](#) was sponsored by state Senator Siobahn Dunnivant, a Republican, and passed when two Democrats crossed party lines to support the legislation.

Dunnivant, who is also an OB/GYN, called the passage "a win for parents" in a Tuesday statement: "A win for parents! My bill SB 656, that gives parents the chance to review sexually explicit material in schools and to provide alternative options has passed the Senate and now the House of Delegates. Now headed to the Governor's desk!"



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A win for parents! My bill SB 656, that gives parents the chance to review sexually explicit material in schools and to provide alternative options has passed the Senate and now the House of Delegates. Now headed to the Governor's desk! pic.twitter.com/8c8Fgtm03V

— Siobhan Dunnivant (@Dunnivant4VA) [March 1, 2022](#)

The Virginia Senate passed the bill on February 9; the House then passed the bill on February 28 by a 52-46 margin.

Should Youngkin sign the bill — and he is expected to — the Virginia Department of Education will need to establish specific policies with relation to schools wishing to teach subjects that include sexually explicit material. Virginia school boards across the state will need adopt these new policies by January 1, 2023.

Schools will also need to give parents the ability to opt their children out of any sexually explicit material that the school intends to teach. In such cases, teachers will need to provide alternative assignments without any sexually explicit content.

Opponents called the new legislation a "book ban," and claimed it was a violation of the First Amendment. Senator John Edwards, a Democrat from Roanoke, made clear the opponents' position.

"There are first amendment issues all over the place with the idea of banning anything," Edwards said. "Even though you say [it doesn't do that], that's exactly what it does."

But fellow Democrat Chap Petersen of Fairfax denied that books would be banned under the new legislation. "I know we're supposed to say the buzz words but this is a parental notification bill so I



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don't have a problem with the legislation," Petersen said.

Dunnavant flatly denied that the legislation was a ban of books in any way. "This shall not be construed as requiring or providing for censoring of any books because that would be objectionable and it is not the intent of the bill," the senator from Henrico said. "This is the opportunity for parents to have a conversation with their child."

The bill only addresses instructional material, and does not include books available in a school's library. One of the key issues in the Virginia gubernatorial race of 2021 was parental involvement in education. Youngkin promoted parental involvement in curriculum, while his opponent, Democrat Terry McAuliffe, strongly opposed it. McAuliffe [vetoed a similar bill](#) when he was Virginia's governor in 2016.

During the second gubernatorial debate last year, McAuliffe made a remark that many observers say cost him the election in the heavily Democratic state. "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach," McAuliffe said.

Youngkin leaned in heavily on McAuliffe's position, maintaining that "parents matter" in their child's education. He began insisting that parents deserved more of a say in their children's education, and went on to win the governor's race — a major tide shift in Virginia politics.

SB 656 was dubbed by some "the Beloved Bill," referring to *Beloved*, a 1987 book by author Toni Morrison. One of Youngkin's last ads featured Fairfax County mother Laura Murphy relating her impression of Morrison's book, a story of slavery featuring depictions of bestiality, infanticide, graphic sex, rape, and violence.

"It was jaw dropping. It had graphic descriptions of all sorts of sexual felonies, including bestiality and gang rape," Murphy said.

Murphy, an attorney, never called for the banning of *Beloved* — only that parents should be informed about the graphic themes of the book.

"Parents matter and parents want to know what's going on in their child's classroom," Murphy said. "This has nothing to do with banning or censoring. As an attorney, I understand the importance of the First Amendment."

The "book banning" cries from Democrats are ridiculous. As Democrat Chap Petersen noted, the new legislation is a parental consent bill — nothing else. Should school systems wish to teach sexually explicit material, they may still do so. There is simply now an extra step of informing parents of any upcoming sexually explicit lessons, and providing alternatives should the parents wish it.



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