Report No. 2025-28

A Review of

# School Library Books

## Questionable Content Shows the Need for More Robust Oversight

Office of the Legislative Auditor General

Report to the **UTAH LEGISLATURE**

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October 14, 2025

TO: THE UTAH STATE LEGISLATURE

Transmitted herewith is our report:

A Review of School Library Books: Questionable Content Shows the Need for More Robust Oversight (Report No. 2025-28)

An audit summary is found at the front of the report. The scope and objectives of the audit are included in the audit summary. In addition, each chapter has a corresponding chapter summary found at its beginning.

We will be happy to meet with appropriate legislative committees, individual legislators, and other state officials to discuss any item contained in the report in order to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations.

Sincerely,

Kade Minchey

Kade R. Minchey, CIA, CFE

Auditor General

[redacted]

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AUDIT SUMMARY

REPORT 2025-28 | October 2025

Office of the Legislative Auditor General | Kade R. Minchey, Auditor General

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

# A REVIEW OF SCHOOL LIBRARY BOOKS

## REPORT SUMMARY

### AUDIT REQUEST

The Legislative Audit Subcommittee was interested in knowing to what degree books in school libraries that haven't been challenged or remain on library shelves contain questionable

### BACKGROUND

In June 2025, we published an audit of how Local Education Agencies (LEAs) respond to book challenges, focusing on procedures and compliance with statute rather than reviewing specific book content. We recommended improvements such as stronger controls over sensitive online material, clearer policy communication to staff, and—most relevant to this report—more robust book selection processes.

### *A Review School Library Books Found Questionable Content, Showing the Need For More Robust Oversight*

Our June 2025 *Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials* recommended:

**Recommendation 2.1**

The Legislature consider the policy question of whether to require Local Education Agencies to have a policy for library book selection processes.

**Recommendation 3.2**

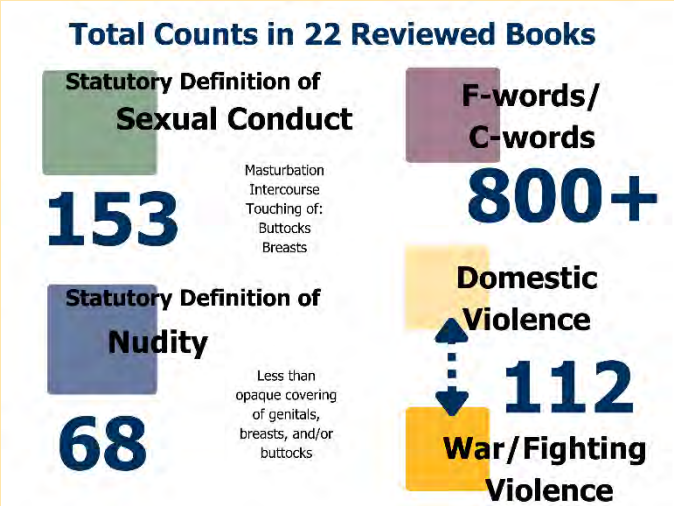
Local Education Agencies create and implement policies for selecting books for, and maintaining classroom library collections.

We reported in our previous audit that librarians are often left to make difficult purchasing decisions without sufficient guidance or support. The findings of this report reiterate the importance of creating robust book selection policies so LEAs and educators can better prevent sensitive materials from entering school collections and ensure compliance with ***Utah Code.***

### *Counts of Questionable Content*

We reviewed a selection of 22 books found in secondary school libraries. We identified notable amounts of statutorily questionable content: 21 (95 percent) of the books contained sexual conduct, and 16 (73 percent) contained nudity.

Several titles also included pervasive explicit language. For example, almost 40 percent of the pages of one book contained repeated uses of the f-word, as well as violence.



# Review of Content in School Library Books Found Questionable Content Showing the Need for More Robust Oversight

In June 2025 we released an audit of the book review processes used at Local Education Agencies (LEAs).[1] We reviewed how LEAs operate when a book is challenged and recommended process improvements. These recommendations included tightening controls over sensitive content online, and better communication of policy to school staff. Most relevant to this report, we recommended that LEAs need more robust book selection processes. This first audit reviewed LEA's processes and compliance with statute but did not review specific books for questionable content. The Legislative Audit Subcommittee was interested in knowing to what degree books in school libraries that haven't been challenged or remain on library shelves contain questionable content.

**21 (95 percent) of the books contained sexual conduct, and 16 (73 percent) contained nudity, as defined by *Utah Code.***

In response, we reviewed a selection of 22 books found in secondary school libraries. We identified notable amounts of statutorily questionable content: 21 (95 percent) of the books contained sexual conduct, and 16 (73 percent) contained nudity. These terms are defined in the "Pornographic and Harmful Materials and Performances" section of ***Utah Code***, giving us a standard for review. Several titles also included pervasive explicit language. For example, almost 40 percent of the pages of one book contained repeated uses of the f-word.[2]

We recognize there is subjectivity in what is considered questionable or objectionable, but we found many instances of sexual content or nudity that appear to violate ***Utah Code***. Appendix A of this report details the books and number of instances.

We reported in our previous audit that librarians are often left to make difficult purchasing decisions without sufficient guidance or support. The findings of this report reiterate the importance of creating robust book selection policies so LEAs and educators can better prevent sensitive materials from entering school collections and ensure compliance with ***Utah Code***.

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1 *A Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools* (Report No. 2025-11)

2 An 800-page book contained over 300 pages with at least one f-word per page.

## Most Books Selected from a List of Questionable Books had Sexual Conduct or Nudity

We reviewed 22 books from public school libraries for content defined as sensitive in ***Utah Code***. Almost every book had content that would likely be determined sensitive by statute. This emphasizes the need for more robust book selection processes in LEAs.

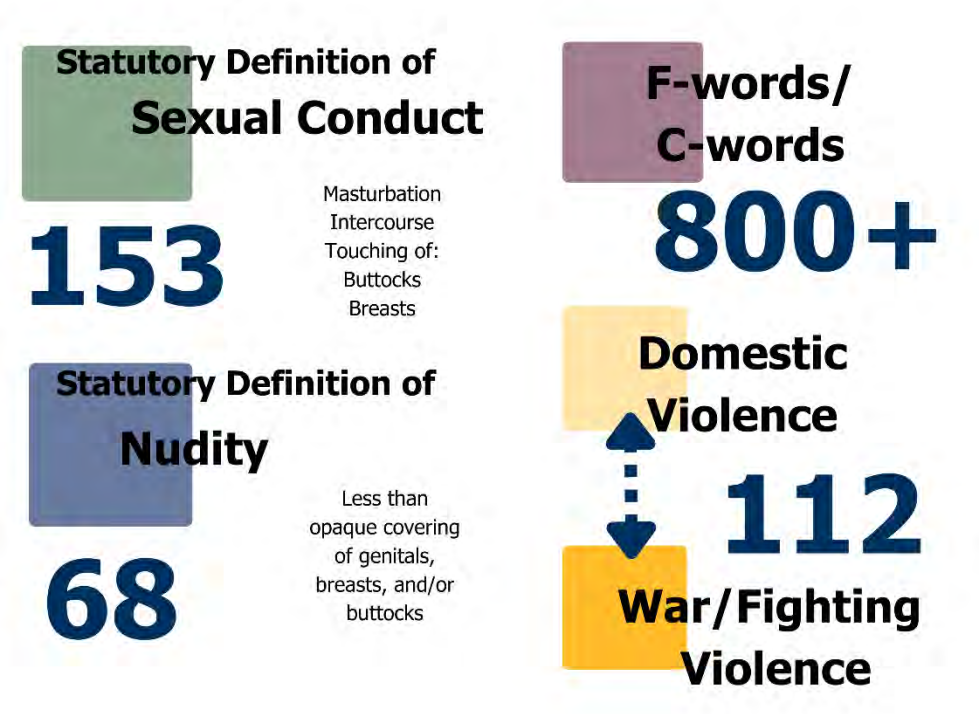
### Most Books We Reviewed Had Statutorily Questionable Content

In our full review of 22 books found in school libraries across the state, we found multiple instances of questionable content.[3] We found that 21 of the 22 (95 percent) contained sexual conduct as defined by ***Utah Code***.[4] 16 of the 22 (73 percent) books also contained nudity as defined by ***Utah Code***. We believe, that if challenged, most of the books we reviewed would be found to be "objective sensitive materials."

***Utah Code*** requires books to be challenged by a member of the community to start the process of determining whether they are "sensitive materials". The material is then reviewed by a local committee that determines if the excerpts from the book meet the statutorily defined threshold to be considered pornographic sensitive material. In this event, the book is permanently removed from schools and deemed "sensitive." We reviewed our book selections using the same definitions of sensitive material used by these local committees. The following figure shows the statutory definitions and total counts of questionable content across 22 books.

3 Each book was read in full.

4 ***Utah Code*** 76-5c-101




*Source: Auditor Generated based on **Utah Code** and review of books.*

Because of legislative concern, in addition to reviewing books for sexual conduct and nudity as defined by ***Utah Code,*** we also reviewed the books for language (f-words and c-words) and violence.[5] In one book alone, we found that the f-word appeared on more than 300 pages, sometimes with more than one instance per page. Some books had no "f-words" while others had more than 100. Violence was less prevalent, with the highest instances of violence in one book being 18 counts.

In our June 2025 *Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools*, we reported that librarians cannot thoroughly vet every book in the library. Also, when new libraries open, book packages are often ordered to quickly build collections. These realities lead to potentially sensitive materials being in school libraries.

### Reviewed Books Were Selected From a List and Found in School Libraries

To complete our review, we read 22 books, searched 42 secondary school catalogs in 7 school districts and visited 8 school libraries.

5 Neither language nor violence are part of the considerations for sensitive materials.

*Source: Auditor generated.*

For this review, we chose books from a list provided by a concerned legislator. The list rates books on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 considered safe for everyone and 5 being most concerning to the list's compiler.[6]

- We started with the list of 4s ("title is not for minors") and 5s ("aberrant content" "for adults only"). There were 186 titles on this list. We took the list as a whole and reordered it randomly. We reviewed the publicly facing library and eBook catalogs in randomly selected secondary schools in 7 school districts.[7, 8] If the books were not found in 3-5 high schools, we moved on to check 3-5 middle or junior high schools. If the books were still not found, we did not add them to our review list. If, within the secondary school search, the book was found to be in any 1 library, we added it to the list of books to review in depth. We selected 20 books that were found across 42 libraries.

6 The rating assigned to each book title is based on a now-defunct website called booklooks.org's rating system. The list we chose the books from is ratedbooks.org.

7 The school districts selected are Davis, Weber, Salt Lake City, Granite, Canyons, Alpine, and Washington.

8 These districts were selected because of their population size, occurrence of book challenges, and publicly available library catalogs.

- In addition to the 20 books from the original list found to be in 1 or more library, we added 2 additional titles, based on legislative concern.
- If a library catalog listed 5 or more titles from our list of 22, we visited the library to confirm the accuracy of the catalog. We conducted 8 library visits, and we found the publicly available catalogs to be accurate in most cases.[9]
- We then read each book in full and marked each potential instance of concern.

## The Amount of Questionable Content in Books Shows the Need for Better Guidance as Recommended in Our Last Audit

**Proactive policies could shift the focus away from reactive policies and prevent potentially sensitive materials from entering schools.**

Current sensitive materials laws and related policies focus on removing sensitive materials from schools rather than preventing them from being added. Proactive policies could shift the focus away from reactive policies and prevent potentially sensitive materials from entering schools. Because of this, our June 2025 report recommended that LEAs and schools need further guidance in classroom and library materials selection. This review supports those conclusions.

### Previous Audit Recommended More Robust Book Selection Guidelines

As noted in our 2025 audit, LEAs generally focus their sensitive materials policies on removal of challenged materials rather than the selection of new materials. This is due to ***Utah Code*** requiring LEAs to have challenge processes in place.[10]

In the audit we recommended:[11]

[9] There was one instance where a librarian had physically removed books from the shelf but had not yet updated the online catalog.

[10] ***Utah Code*** 53G-10-103-4

[11] *A Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools* (Report No. 2025-11) p. 25

**RECOMMENDATION 2.1**

The Legislature could consider the policy question of whether to require Local Education Agencies to have a policy for library book selection processes.

We found that within the LEAs, the challenge processes to determine if a book already in schools is sensitive are working as laid out in ***Utah Code*** when a book is contested. The problem is that this relies on individuals finding out about a book and challenging it. As found in this report, this process is not removing all questionable books.

**We found over 100 instances of content that meet the definitions of sexual conduct and nudity within *Utah Code*.**

In the report released earlier this year we recommended that LEAs focus on improving the processes for how books are added to libraries and classrooms in the first place. Often, librarians report making decisions about which books to purchase on their own. Instead, we suggest that LEAs can provide support to librarians in making book selections. Thus, this review acts in tandem with our previous report. We believe that by creating new review processes "librarians would have additional professional protection when or if books are challenged."[12]

We believe classroom teachers and librarians alike would benefit from robust policies that aid in appropriate collection cultivation, as would students. To that end, one of our June 2025 recommendations was:[13]

**RECOMMENDATION 3.2**

Local Education Agencies should create and implement policies for selecting books for and maintaining classroom library collections.

This need was further highlighted throughout our work in this current review.

## The Results of the Review Reiterate the Importance of Strong Policies

Altogether in our review, across the 22 books we found over 200 instances of content that meet the definitions of sexual conduct and nudity within ***Utah***

12 *A Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools*, Report No. 2025-11

13 See Appendix B for a full list of the recommendations from the June audit.

***Code***.[14] We also recognize that these definitions, while finite, are applied by humans with subjective views. Thus, what one might consider to be aberrant might not meet that threshold for another.

Be that as it may, ***Utah Code*** requires that:[15]

> ***In evaluating, selecting or otherwise considering action related to a given instructional material…each public school and each LEA shall prioritize protecting children from the harmful effects of illicit pornography….***

To that end we reiterate our previous findings and recommendations regarding book selection and challenges. This review demonstrates that questionable materials continue to appear in school libraries under existing selection practices. LEAs' challenge processes provide a necessary safeguard, but they do not prevent questionable content from entering collections. By adopting stronger, proactive selection policies, LEAs can provide educators with clearer standards, offer professional protection when challenges arise, and safeguard students in alignment with legislative intent and ***Utah Code***.

[14] See Appendix A for specific counts per book.

[15] ***Utah Code*** 53G-103(2)(c)

# Appendices

## A. A Complete Count of Content Reviews of Questionable Books

# Appendix A

## A Complete Count of Content Reviews of Questionable Books

The ***Utah Code*** definitions of "sexual conduct" and "nudity" guided the review of each book.[16] ***Utah Code*** 76-5c-101 defines sexual content including:

- Masturbation
- Touching of an individual's clothed or unclothed genitals, pubic area, or if the individual is female, breast, whether alone or between members of the same or opposite
- Sex or between humans and animals in an act of apparent or actual sexual stimulation or gratification

It defines "nudity" as:

- Showing of human male or female genitals, pubic area, or buttocks, with less than an opaque covering
- The showing of a female breast with less than an opaque covering, or any portion of the female breast below the top of the areola
- The depiction of covered male genitals in a discernibly turgid state

In addition, because of specific concerns, we reviewed language and specifically f-words, c-words, and violence. Within ***Utah Code,*** language and violence are not part of the considerations for sensitive materials. Each of the 22 books was read in full and each instance of sexual conduct, nudity, foul language and violence was noted. Language counts are approximated because there were instances where more than one f-word or c-word would appear on one page. Thus, the counts are by page, not by specific word.

These titles and their content counts are shown in the following figures.

[16] ***Utah Code*** 76-5c-101

# Counts from Book Reviews

| | Sexual Conduct | Nudity | F Words/C Words | Violence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison | 13 | 1 | <5 | 4 |
| Red White and Royal Blue by Casey McQuiston | 8 | 4 | >100 | 0 |
| From Blood and Ash by Jennifer Armentrout | 6 | 1 | <5 | 7 |
| The Duff by Kody Keplinger | 5 | 0 | <50 | 1 |
| The Gift by Danielle Steele | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi | 14 | 7 | <5 | 10 |
| Catch the Sun by Jennifer Hartmann | 16 | 3 | >50 | 0 |
| Beautiful Disaster by James McGuire | 15 | 6 | <100 | 17 |

# Counts from Book Reviews

| | Sexual Conduct | Nudity | F Words/C Words | Violence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Carnival At Bray by Jessie Ann Foley | 3 | 2 | >10 | 0 |
| Jesus Land by Julia Scheeres | 9 | 8 | >10 | 6 |
| People Kill People by Ellen Hopkins | 6 | 3 | <50 | 6 |
| Sold by Patricia McCormick | 4 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| Last Night at The Telegraph Club by Melinda Lo | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Blood and Honey by Shelby Mahurin | 2 | 1 | >10 | 9 |
| The Haters by Robyn Harding | 6 | 3 | <100 | 0 |
| Wicked by Gregory Maguire | 7 | 8 | <5 | 5 |

# Counts from Book Reviews

| | Sexual Conduct | Nudity | F Words/C Words | Violence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| This is Kind of An Epic Love Story by Kacen Callender | 3 | 0 | >10 | 0 |
| House of Earth and Blood by Sarah J. Maas | 7 | 1 | >300 | 3 |
| Strange Truth by Maggie Thrash | 2 | 4 | >10 | 0 |
| Assassination Classroom Vol. 1 by Yusei Matsui | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18 |
| A Clash of Kings, by George R. R. Martin | 14 | 14 | <50 | 12 |
| The Glass Castle by Jeanette Walls | 5 | 2 | <5 | 6 |
| Summary | 153 | 68 | >850 | 112 |

*Source: Auditor Generated based on Review of Books' content.*

## B. A Complete List of 2025 *A Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools* Audit Recommendations

# A Complete List of 2025 *A Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools* Audit Recommendations

The 2025 *A Performance Audit of Sensitive Materials in Schools* (Report No. 2025-11) made the following four recommendations:

The numbering convention assigned to each recommendation consists of its chapter followed by a period and recommendation number within that chapter.

## Recommendation 1.1

We recommend that the Legislature consider the policy question of whether to require Local Education Agencies to decrypt and use blocked keyword lists within Utah's Online School Library and any other educational databases with internal search functions.

## Recommendation 2.1

We recommend that the Legislature consider the policy question of whether to require Local Education Agencies to have a policy for library book selection processes.

## Recommendation 3.1

We recommend that Local Education Agencies create and implement policies and processes to ensure communication with all school staff regarding sensitive materials processes, and utilize tools offered by the Utah State Board of Education to do so.

## Recommendation 3.2

We recommend that Local Education Agencies create and implement policies for selecting books for, and maintaining classroom library collections.

# Agency Response

Utah State Board of Education

October 6, 2025

Kade Minchey, CIA, CFE
Auditor General
Office of the Legislative Auditor General
W315 State Capitol Complex
Salt Lake City, UT 84114

Mr. Minchey,

We appreciate the opportunity to provide a brief response to report 2025-28 *A Review of School Library Books*.

Although the report does not include recommendations for the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), we reaffirm our commitment to supporting Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in maintaining appropriate and effective school library collections.

USBE remains dedicated to helping LEAs ensure their library resources align with educational standards, reflect community values, and meet student needs. We will continue to offer guidance, technical assistance, and professional development to support LEAs in developing and reviewing their collections.

Our goal is to foster learning environments where students have access to enriching, age-appropriate materials that promote growth and achievement. As part of our general oversight of public education, USBE is committed to supporting these efforts.

With respect,

Molly Hart, Ed.D.
Utah State Board of Education
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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