

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

YOUTH FREE EXPRESSION

November 20, 2025

School Board
North Little Rock Board of Education
2400 Willow St.
North Little Rock, AR 72114

Dear Members of the Board,

The National Coalition Against Censorship is an alliance of national nonprofit groups dedicated to protecting freedom of expression, including the rights of K-12 students, teachers, and staff. We are writing to you concerning the hiding of books containing LGBTQIA+ content on the district's Epic Reading digital library platform. These books were electronically restricted without following proper district policy or state law. We urge the district to rectify its misapplications of the law, commit to following district policy, and once again make the hidden books available on Epic.

In a letter issued on October 21, 2025,¹ Superintendent Pilewski and other school administrators directed all elementary principals and teachers who use Epic Reading to "hide" books "which contain LGBTQIA+ content" from student view because the books "may not align with the diverse belief systems of all our school district families." The letter includes a list of fifty titles to be restricted.

The October 21 directive and public statements made by the district's spokesman, Dustin Barnes,² indicate that the district has applied Arkansas law more broadly than necessary in three ways: (1) by applying a law directed at instructional books to a library database; (2) by using a law aimed at physical books to limit access to materials on an online platform; and (3) by failing to follow book challenge procedures as specified by statute.

Mr. Barnes cited Acts 237 and 372 as justification for the letter's requirements.³ Act 237, also known as the LEARNS Act, stipulates in relevant part that *before* fifth grade, public school teachers are prohibited from providing *classroom instruction* on sexually explicit materials, sexual reproduction, sexual intercourse, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Ark. Code Ann.

¹ Letter from Dr. Gregory J. Pilewski, Ed.D., Superintendent, et al., to Elementary Principals & Teachers (Oct. 21, 2025)

<https://arktimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Action-Memo-Epic-Reading-Content.pdf>.

² Arielle Robinson, *North Little Rock School District tells teachers to hide LGBTQ+ books*, Arkansas Times (Oct. 22, 2025),

<https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2025/10/22/north-little-rock-school-district-tells-teachers-to-hide-lgbtq-books>.

³ Dmitry Martirosov, *North Little Rock School District instructions staff to hide books with LGBTQ+ content from reading platform*, Arkansas Democrat Gazette (Oct. 23, 2025),

<https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2025/oct/23/north-little-rock-school-district-instructs-staff/>.

§ 6-16-157(c). It is our understanding that the Epic Reading platform provides supplementary materials and is not limited to those books which are taught in the classroom. In other words, Epic Reading is an online library and is not limited to instructional materials. Act 237 thus provides an insufficient basis to ban supplementary materials such as those on Epic Reading. Furthermore, North Little Rock elementary schools serve students through the fifth grade, meaning that all fifth grade students—who are not subject to the requirements of the relevant section of the LEARNS Act—will nonetheless be deprived of valuable reading materials because of this policy.

Regarding the district’s invocation of Act 372, Section 4 of the Act amended Arkansas law to require the school district to “have a written policy for addressing challenged material that is *physically present* in the library and available to the public...” Ark. Code Ann. § 6-25-105(b) (emphasis added). However, Epic Reading is an *online* book repository and any literature housed on it is not physically present, per the statute’s requirements. Therefore, the relevant section of Act 372 is inapplicable in this instance and cannot be used to justify the district’s directive.

We are also concerned about the district’s failure to follow proper procedures for book removals pursuant to § 6-25-107. Arkansas law requires that library media centers located within elementary schools “store non-age-appropriate sexual content... in a locked compartment within a designated area.” *Id.* § 6-25-107(a). With written parental permission, students may view or check out the book from the library media center. *Id.* § 6-25-107(b). It is our understanding that the books in question are no longer accessible to students on Epic Reading, regardless of parental approval—a result that is not authorized by this provision of Arkansas law.

Even if the books housed on Epic Reading could be considered instructional or supplementary rather than library materials, district policy regarding the challenges to such materials outlines a multitiered review process prior to removal. See District Policy 5.6. To our knowledge, the district failed to follow these procedures before issuing its directive. It is important that the district follows its policies and acts in a transparent manner which ensures that all parties—including educational professionals, students, parents, and other members of the school community—feel represented in any decision. Disregarding the district’s *own policy* simultaneously erodes public faith in local leadership and deprives students of access to literature to which they are otherwise entitled.

A school library is meant to include a broad selection of books that provide value to the student body. But if every library book were required to appeal to every student, the shelves would be bare. The Supreme Court has established that public school officials’ discretion regarding the removal of library books is particularly limited to ensure the protection of students’ First Amendment right to access information because “students must always remain free to inquire, to study, and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding” and “the school library is the principal locus of such freedom.”⁴ A plurality of the Supreme Court has agreed that while districts “possess significant discretion to determine the content of their school libraries,” that discretion nonetheless “may not be exercised in a narrowly partisan or political manner.”⁵ Removing books from the shelves of the school library based on the intent to deny students

⁴ *Board of Education v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 868-69 (1982) (quoting *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589, 603 (1967)).

⁵ *Id.* at 870.

access to ideas with which the district does not agree—such as the presence of LGBTQIA+ content—exposes the district to constitutional liability.⁶

Lastly, NCAC would be remiss to not point out the irony of the district’s justification that the removal of these books is to ensure that materials on the Epic Reading platform “align with the diverse belief systems of all our school district families,” while excluding all representation for those who may themselves identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. District Policy 5.7 states that “[p]romoting the dialogue characteristic of a healthy democracy necessitates the maintenance of a broad range of materials and information representing varied points of view on current and historical issues.” Limiting student access to books simply because they contain LGBTQIA+ content is antithetical to this mission.

We strongly urge the district to unhide the fifty books on the Epic Reading platform. We also ask that the district affirm that it will follow its own review policies in the future, including adjudicating challenges via outlined procedures. Furthermore, the district should not use inapplicable Arkansas laws to justify limiting students’ access to literature.

We have created a resource to help school officials address the problem of book challenges, *Material Review and Policy Guidelines and Examples*, which includes sample book challenge procedures from school districts across the country. It is attached.

Please let us know if you have any questions or need any further support.

Thank you for your attention and consideration to this matter.

Sincerely,

The National Coalition Against Censorship

Co-signed by: American Booksellers for Free Expression
Arkansas Authors Against Book Bans
Arkansas Library Association
Arkansas Right to Read Project
The Authors Guild
Children's and Young Adult Books Committee, PEN America
EveryLibrary
Freedom to Read Project
Indivisible Little Rock & Central Arkansas
PFLAG National
Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

⁶ See *id.* at 871.