

## School Library Book Removals in Virginia

# Study resolution

- Directs JLARC to survey school divisions about
  - Books removed from school libraries since July 2020
  - Process and basis for decision to remove books
  - Availability of state-level assistance for divisions to make book removal decisions

SJ 251 (2025 Session)

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## Research activities

- Reviewed Code of Virginia, Virginia Administrative Code, and division book removal policies
- Interviewed relevant K–12 stakeholder associations and Virginia Department of Education staff
- Coordinated with VCU's Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory to develop and administer survey of school divisions

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## In brief

Almost two-thirds of divisions responding to a JLARC survey did not remove any books based on content between July 2020 and March 2025.

Remaining one-third of divisions removed at least one book, but most removal activity was heavily concentrated in five divisions that removed the most books.

Divisions collectively reported removing 223 unique book titles.

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## Local school boards have authority over school library book selection and removal

- Virginia Constitution grants school boards supervisory and operational authority over local schools
- State does not have authority over division selection and removal of library books under current law and provides no written guidance

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## State sets some requirements for divisions related to school libraries

- Maintain a library in each school to meet the research, inquiry, and reading requirements of instruction and general student interest
- Employ library staff with certain educational qualifications

## State also sets requirements related to *instructional materials*, some of which are in libraries

- School divisions must
  - Set policies for selection & evaluation of instructional materials
  - Set procedures for handling challenged instructional materials
  - Consider the views of teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens
- VDOE guidance states library books are considered instructional materials only when used for
  - Completion of an assignment or
  - As part of an academic or extracurricular program

# Most divisions have policies to review challenged library books, which typically include committees

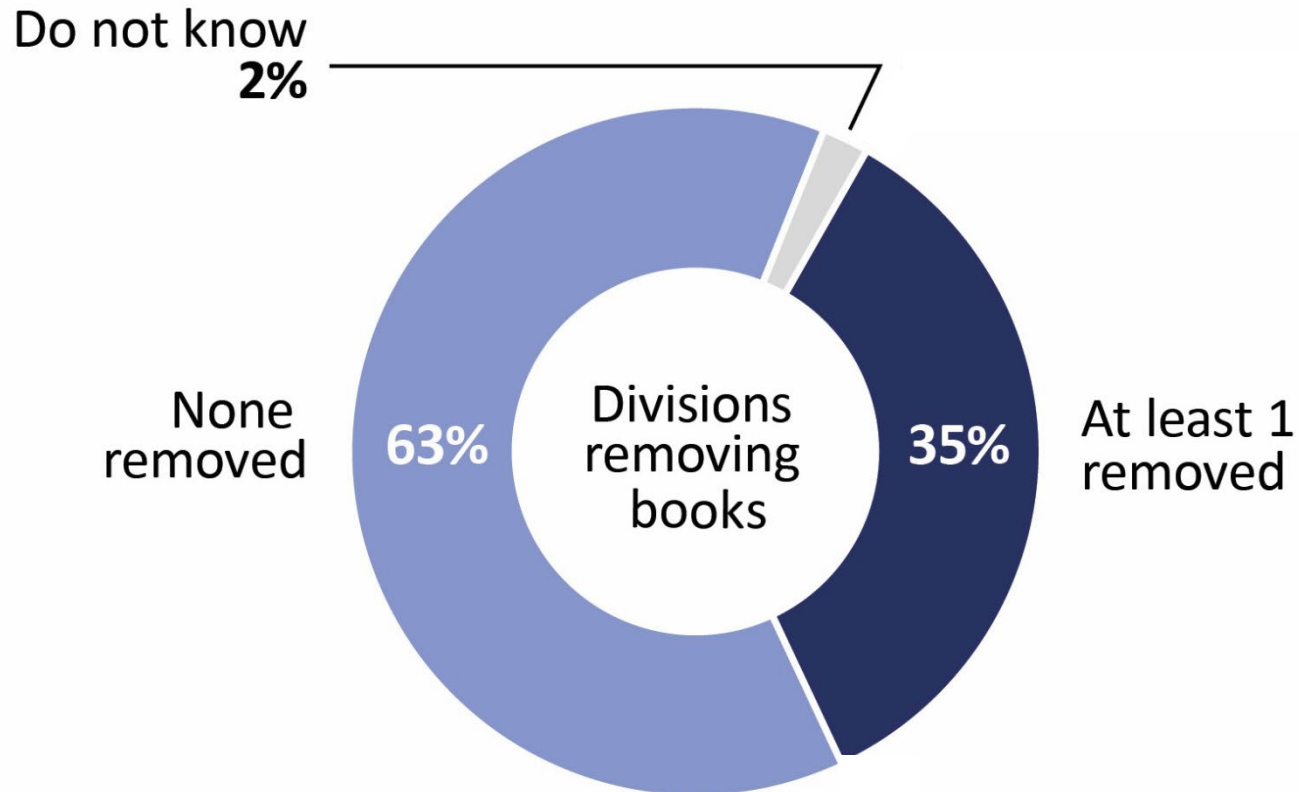
- 88% of divisions responding to JLARC survey\* reported having a formal book removal policy
- Book removal policies vary widely in detail and specificity\*\*
- 73% of divisions responding have a designated review committee, typically consisting of school or division staff (including librarians and/or media specialists) & parents

\*94 of 131 divisions responded to the JLARC survey = 72% response rate.

\*\*Most commonly used policy requires (i) complainant to submit form to school principal or central office and (ii) principal to create a review committee. Policy allows complainant to appeal committee decision to superintendent and then school board.

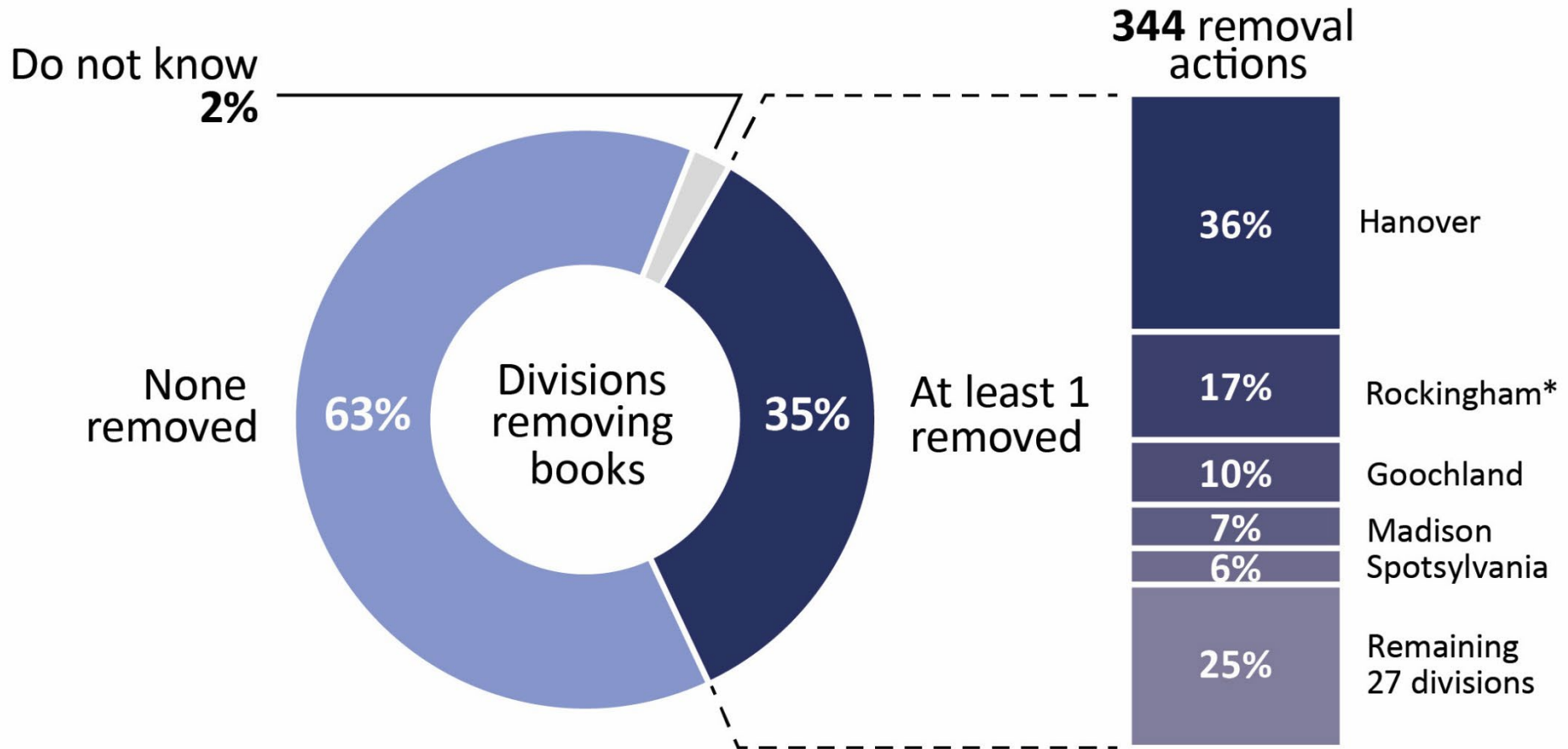


## Almost two-thirds of divisions responding did not remove any books based on content\* (July 2020 to March 2025)



\*Excludes books removed for other reasons (e.g., in poor condition or infrequently checked out).  
Appendix B of written report provides information for each division that responded to the JLARC survey.

# Most book removal activity was concentrated in a small number of school divisions



\*Rockingham County Public Schools indicated removals were temporary pending formal policy approval.

# Divisions removed 223 unique book titles; “Gender Queer” was the most commonly removed

| Book title   | Author          | # of divisions removing |
|--|-----------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Gender Queer: A Memoir</i>                          | Maia Kobabe     | 7                       |
| <i>Tilt</i>  | Ellen Hopkins   | 6                       |
| <i>Identical</i>                                       | Ellen Hopkins   | 5                       |
| <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i>                 | Stephen Chbosky | 5                       |
| <i>Beyond Magenta</i>                                  | Susan Kuklin    | 4                       |
| <i>Burned</i>  | Ellen Hopkins   | 4                       |
| <i>Fallout</i>   | Ellen Hopkins   | 4                       |
| <i>Lawn Boy</i>  | Jonathan Evison | 4                       |
| <i>Me and Earl and the Dying Girl</i>                  | Jesse Andrews   | 4                       |
| <i>Smoke</i>   | Ellen Hopkins   | 4                       |
| <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> | Sherman Alexie  | 4                       |
| <i>The Bluest Eye</i>                                  | Toni Morrison   | 4                       |
| <i>Tricks</i>  | Ellen Hawkins   | 4                       |

Appendix C of written report lists all book titles removed. Books may have been removed from individual schools or an entire division.

# Sexual content and local policy were primary reasons cited by divisions for removing books

- §22.1-16.8 (instructional material; sexually explicit content)
- “Sexually explicit content”
- “Division regulation”
- “Local policy”
- “Determination of developmental inappropriateness”
- “Vulgar language”

Reasons shown are examples of reasons reported by divisions on JLARC survey.

## Statute cited as reason for removing many books not applicable

- Divisions frequently cited a 2022 state law as the reason why a book was removed (§22.1-16.8)
- However, the 2022 law does not prohibit use of material with sexually explicit content or require its removal from school libraries
- Rather, the 2022 law requires
  - Parental notification when instructional material will include sexually explicit content
  - Parents being allowed to request alternative material for their child

Note: Study resolution directed JLARC to specifically ask whether §22.1-16.8 was a reason for removal.

## Two factors may be contributing to the incorrect citing of the 2022 law

- Legislative intent was in enactment clause; not in legislation text in the online Code of Virginia
  - *“...Provisions of this act shall not be construed as requiring or providing for the censoring of books in public elementary and secondary schools.”*
- Superintendent’s memo (2023) intended to clarify confusion did not specifically state that law is not applicable to removing books for all students or from libraries

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## School divisions have authority over library materials, even if some incorrectly cited law

- Divisions have discretion over library material selection and library book removal policies
- May be useful (at least for some divisions) for VDOE to clarify that 2022 law does not apply to library book removal

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## JLARC staff for this report

Justin Brown, Associate Director

Jessica Sabbath, Managing Editor