



MOMS FOR LIBERTY
WILLIAMSON COUNTY CHAPTER
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2 Aug 2021

Dear Williamson County Commissioners,

Moms for Liberty (M4L) of Williamson County would like to thank you for your time during the public commentary at your July 12th meeting. We especially want to thank Commissioners Story, Sturgeon, Smith, Lothers, Nations, Mason, Landrum, Williams, and Rainey for speaking up on behalf of their constituents, and more importantly, on behalf of the children of Williamson County. This letter serves to follow up some of the talking points of the 90 minute dialogue with Jason Golden.

4.403 COMMITTEE

Much credence was given to the newly formed 4.403 Review Committee. M4L would like to point out the following:

1. Thirty-four parents (complainants) filed 4.403 “Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Materials,” affecting 21 of 27 total elementary schools (Attachment 2).
2. Juli Oyer, chairperson of the committee and Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools, sent an email (Attachment 3) to complainants on 23 June, announcing the makeup of the committee and that the “reconsideration process...will occur over the next few months.” The language of this email sent a clear message to parents that WCS has no sense of urgency in this matter, nor do they feel inclined to communicate the plan with parents beyond “[it will] occur over the next few months.”
3. In the weeks following this email, multiple parents inquired of Ms. Oyer regarding the progress made. Ms. Oyer’s replies were:
 - a. “The committee is just beginning their work and has not established all of the details you have asked about.”
 - b. “The committee is just beginning their work and has not determined the criteria they will be using for the review of the curriculum.”
 - c. “The committee has not determined additional parties they would like to speak with for inputs at this time.”
 - d. “Complainants will be communicated with as it relates to all of your questions below about the hearing.”
 - e. “When we do, it will be communicated with those who wish to be involved in the hearing.”
 - f. Bullets (a) through (e) comprise a total 99 words of a 191 word email, not including the salutation and signature block. The remaining 48% of the email is just as vague and gives no material or actionable information.
 - g. This email represents the only direct update to the complainants.
4. On 26 July, Ms. Oyer emailed a “Reconsideration Committee Timeline” (Attachment 4). The timeline is vague, listing only the “week of” an event (vice an actual date) and repeatedly lists the vague action “discussion with needed resources.” What are these resources? Parents would like to know.
5. Additionally, the schedule reveals the action “Discussion with TLA regarding any suggestions for modification or removal” occurring for every quarter under review. We understand that TLA requested a seat at the 4.403 table and this timeline clearly shows that request has been granted. This is an affront to parents, as TLA has been responsible for the implementation and total enforcement of WW in WCS. Mr. Allen, Assistant Superintendent of TLA, has been a walking,

talking commercial for Wit & Wisdom in BOE work sessions, despite his admittance via other correspondence that WW has problems. How can TLA be an objective voice in this process? Answer: it cannot. And it should not partake in the “Reevaluation of the Instructional Materials” that it has been heavy handedly enforcing on teachers and principals over the past year. The committee should conduct its review outside the purview and free from the pressure of TLA. Once the committee’s recommendations are made, then it will be TLA’s job to execute those recommendations. *TLA should not be informing or writing recommendations; this is a clear conflict of interest.*

6. A librarian is seated on the committee as a union representative. In light of recent statements made by the NEA with regard to its support of Critical Race Theory and its encouragement of teachers to instruct CRT despite state laws that prohibit such practice, the optics of this are clearly not favorable. The union has, and should have, no standing in curricular matters and certainly not one that supersedes parental interests. If the union sits at the table, would not an elementary ELA teacher have provided better inputs in this review? Further, how about an ELA teacher for each grade under review? A librarian is certificated to curate books. A teacher is certificated to teach curriculum. Why is there not a teacher on this committee?
7. The parent organization seated on the committee is a PTSO representative. Page 2, line 24 of Board Policy 4.403 (Attachment 1) leaves the door open for “other parent organization.” Moms for Liberty Williamson County, a nonprofit 501c4, registered in the State of Tennessee, is also a parent organization that has dedicated over 1200 hours in the research of Wit & Wisdom and invested over \$5k of parent money to bring it to light, and yet our organization was not offered a seat at the table. If parents are not permitted to sit at the table, they should *at the very least*, be permitted to attend the committee meetings. Would a fair trial conduct the examination of evidence in secret before the witnesses are called? No. Trials are open and transparent, and so should be the 4.403 process.
8. Furthermore, the parents of M4L accessed the WW Teacher’s Manuals through links provided to the state of Florida, utilizing a Florida law requiring their online accessibility. Had we relied on WCS, our work would have been impossible, as each parent would have been required to make an appointment with the WCS Central Office and then physically go read the paper versions during office hours. Each teacher’s manual is 400-500 pages. The Florida version and Tennessee versions appear identical, apart from different page numbers due to placement of Table of Contents, etc. Thus, the page numbers cited in our 4.403 complaints will not line up with TN versions. This again emphasizes the need for our parent researchers to have a seat at the table to ensure that our concerns are adequately and correctly conveyed.
9. It has been reported that the disposition of the committee is such that “only 38 people have complained out of 14,900 students in K-5,” and they do not feel compelled to change the curriculum for a “few vocal parents.” (Never mind the 600 signatures on our petition for removal of WW.) What an abysmal message to send to the parents of Williamson County. The outcome of this process directly impacts elementary age children and should be undertaken with humility and gravity.

Mr. Golden stated that 30 of 130 books have been challenged in the 4.403 process. He further stated that the committee will review all 30 books. It cannot be overstated that the accompanying Teachers Manuals, usually ~400-500 pages each, must also be reviewed. Without a thorough understanding of how material is repeatedly presented to students for weeks on end, a true understanding of parent’s objections to Wit & Wisdom is not possible. The explicit and implicit curriculum must *both* be examined. WW is highly scripted, stopping just short of giving the teacher a script to read from. Twenty-two parents covered this material in 6 weeks, totaling 1200 hours of effort. What’s more, we are continuing to find even more inappropriate content, including a kindergarten teacher’s manual discussing oppression based on skin color.

TEACHERS

Mr. Golden's position towards teachers was often circular or contradictory. On one hand, he repeatedly touted "our teachers chose this material" and "teachers preferred this curriculum by a 3:1 margin," essentially disavowing responsibility for WW's presence in WCS and placing the blame on the teachers. In the same breath, he repeatedly spoke of "trusting teachers to know their students." It bears mentioning that perhaps WCS should consider trusting parents to know their children.

Furthermore, Mr. Golden and Dave Allen, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching, Learning and Assessment [Curriculum], repeatedly tout that "60% of teachers preferred WW," "70% of teachers chose WW," or "teachers chose WW by a 3 to 1 margin." However, the WW anchor texts were *never* available for teacher review, nor were they available for public review. At the 17 Feb 2020 Professional Development (PD) day, teachers reviewed four curriculum options: CKLA/Amplify, Open Up Resources/EL Education, Great Minds/Wit & Wisdom, and McGraw-Hill/Wonders. Many had exercised due diligence in reviewing the curriculum texts for CKLA, EL, and Wonders prior to this day, because those materials had been made available at a physical review location, per standard procedure. Being a late addition, only the teacher's manuals, averaging 500 pages each, for WW were present at the PD day.

Examination of the "Padlet," an online discussion board used on that day (attachment 5), reveals there were multiple questions about inappropriate content: two in the overview, two regarding CKLA, and two regarding WW. Teachers asked repeatedly if they were to have flexibility and freedom to amend content and were told by the Padlet administrator that the district would make those decisions. This is not indicative of Mr. Golden's statements about "trusting teachers to know their students." In fact, the Padlet administrator even admits that he/she had received emails with attached articles about WW prior to this 17 Feb meeting, but dismissed the concerns as overblown. Dave Allen makes a similar statement at the board work session on 17 June 2021.

If teachers were already expressing content concerns over WW, one can assume that WW already had a reputation for age-inappropriateness. Though it was the only curriculum to pass TN state review on its first try, Wonders was largely panned for "noncompliance" with the "Science of Reading" initiative and its traditional basal text format. The 13 May BOE work session gave further excuses to why Wonders was not preferred (McGraw Hill denies these allegations & regularly includes their adherence to the Science of Reading and TN Standards in their presentations to districts.) So at the end of the day, with CKLA and EL Education being largely objectionable due to inappropriate content, and Wonders being pushed away by the district, teachers voted in good faith for WW because they assumed it would be an improvement, even though there were no actual reading texts available for review, just teachers' manuals.

This bears repeating: without seeing the anchor texts, teachers chose Wit & Wisdom because *they perceived it to be the lesser of evils.*

Perhaps if Mr. Golden and Mr. Allen were truly interested in knowing what WCS teachers think about WW, the culture of fear surrounding voicing content concerns would not exist; teachers who oppose it are scared for their jobs. How, in WCS's current push for "Diversity Equity and Inclusion," can there exist a climate of fear amongst WCS's most valuable assets, its teachers? Is not honest feedback encouraged? When teachers finally received the anchor texts from WW, many were alarmed. When they tried to modify the script or sidestep books or sections of books, they were berated and threatened by Dr. Allen and Ms. Oyer. Teachers, who Jason Golden says know students best, were not allowed to deviate from a script that they knew was upsetting and potentially damaging to our children. Instead, they were instructed to teach WW "faithfully and with fidelity." The culture of fear and total compliance in WCS faculty should alarm the county commission.

I submit that Mr. Golden and Mr. Allen have not a leg to stand on in touting teacher approval numbers of WW until they institute an anonymous teacher survey, preferably by a third party, to give teachers the freedom to speak without fear of reprisal. Furthermore, this culture of fear must be extirpated from Williamson County Schools. No organization can function effectively with heavy handed centralized control/execution and lack of ability to give honest feedback.

THE WOODSRUNNER LIE & OPTING OUT

There are certain things Mr. Golden likes to repeat ad nauseum as evidence that WCS “takes these matters seriously” and one of those things is the removal of Woodrunner. This is half truth: Woodrunner was indeed taught to 4th grade students during the 2020-2021 school year, despite the expressed concerns of teachers over its content. Mr. Golden is actually referencing the scheduled removal of Woodrunner for the 2021-2022 school year. Additionally, consider it as evidence that if Great Minds considered this book to be appropriate for a 4th grader, let that be an indicator of the material they consider appropriate for other grade levels.

Additionally, Wit & Wisdom’s use of “anchor texts” means that up to 20 lessons will “spiral” around a single book. When a parent “opts out” of a text, that child is made to sit in a separate location with, presumably, a different activity. How much learning is lost in this way? If a child opts out of a book, they are thereby opted out of 20 lessons that teach them to read and write. Mr. Golden stated on Monday that “literacy is #1,” and yet children will be watching paint dry instead of learning literacy because the anchor texts in WCS are objectionable to parents.

“Objectionable” bears some explanation. WW has recurring topics of suicide ideation, cannibalism, oppressed people of color, oppressive white people, extreme emotion, graphic death, dark imagery, anti-family, anti-America, anti-church, and age-inappropriate topics to include murder, graphic mating, gender fluidity, anti-authority, torture, rape, adultery, scalping/skinning of humans, stillbirth, excessive gore, excessive violence, drunkenness, and promiscuity (attachment 6). Furthermore, M4L has filed a formal complaint (attachment 7) with the TN DOE over Wit & Wisdom Grade 2 Module 3, as we believe it to be in violation of TCA 49-6-10, otherwise known as the “Anti-CRT” Law.

The psychological effects of “opting out” also bear mentioning. When a child is removed from their class and put in isolation of sorts, how does that affect the child? Do they understand that they did nothing wrong? Will they receive ridicule from other children? Will they feel ostracized? Dr. Gary Thompson, Doctor of Clinical Psychology and co-founder of Early Life Child Psychology, speaks to the psychological effect of shame on a child. Of course, he is primarily referring to the child victimized by the destructive teaching of CRT. But what of the potential for shame of the child who must sit by themselves outside the classroom every day for weeks? Can WCS not find a curriculum that does not result in a fracturing of the class? Mr. Golden enjoyed pointing out that “To Kill a Mockingbird” is the most opted-out book of all time. M4L would like to point out that that is a high school text. These are elementary age children learning to read.

Furthermore, if a child opts out of not only a book, but perhaps an entire module, as they are apt to do for Grade 2 Module 3, who is writing alternative curriculum for WCS? Mr. Golden states that ELA is “far too complicated” to write curriculum for. Then what of the children, especially those with IEPs, who are guaranteed a Fair and Appropriate Public Education? If WCS has to write a curriculum for those children, which clearly has to line up with the standards, then why can’t they write an entirely new curriculum that would align with state standards as well as provide texts that aren’t controversial or inappropriate? Additionally, will WCS be hiring extra teachers to instruct the students during their down time? Where will it take place? If WCS seeks to boost test scores by boosting lexile levels with WW, what about all the children sidelined due to the dark, age-inappropriate material?

Furthermore, parents have been given conflicting information regarding alternatives available for their children. While Mr. Allen has assured some of our parents that alternative curriculum will be available, others have been told by their principals that no such alternative curriculum exists. It has been reported that the 4.403 committee may recommend alternate texts from Appendix D of the WW Teachers Manual for the corresponding module. This means that if a parent opts-out of a Grade 2 Module 3 book, WCS intends to assign as “independent study” a supplemental book from that very same module! What a slap in the face to parents! A parent makes a difficult decision to pull their child from questionable curriculum only to be assigned another book from that same questionable curriculum! It is now two weeks until school start, and no list of alternative texts has been confirmed.

Principals seem to be giving a “standard verbiage” to parents who meet with them regarding opting out. One principal in particular told a set of parents that their concerns are isolated and not shared by other parents, while other parents can directly refute this claim. How many others’ concerns have been downplayed and dismissed in this fashion? Is this yet another round of verbiage that has been handed down to principals from the WCS Central Office? Some parents who previously had excellent relationships with their child’s principal are now scratching their heads as that same principal suddenly has nothing but canned responses to offer. It does not paint WCS in a positive light when parents receive pre-ordained canned responses from a controlling and micro-managing central office.

WCS ADOPTION OF WIT & WISDOM

Mr. Golden asserted that WW was chosen through “thoughtful process.” The timeline of this curriculum selection and adoption does not bear that out. Slides 159-161 of Attachment 6 illustrate the following;

1. 18 Nov – Textbook adoption committee members approved (28 teachers, 26 parents)
2. 2 Dec – Textbook review committee meets
3. 9 Dec – WCS publishes public textbook review dates: Jan 15, 21, 30 and Feb 3, 6.
4. Dec-Jan – WCS receives sample curriculum from Amplify (CKLA), Open Up Resources (EL Education), and McGraw-Hill (Wonders). No such samples from Great Minds (Wit & Wisdom) were provided.
5. 15 Jan – Deadline for waiver submission to TN DOE (window was 1 Oct 2019 -15 Jan 2020). Deadline was extended by DOE to accommodate WW.
6. 15 Jan-6 Feb – Five public review dates of aforementioned curriculum (WW not present)
7. 13 Feb – WCS applies for waiver for Wit & Wisdom; WCS Director of Curriculum, Jenny Lopez, sends email to textbook review committee parents notifying them of a 4th possible curriculum – Wit and Wisdom
8. 17 Feb – Teacher PD day when curriculum was reviewed by teachers
9. 21 Feb - WCS Waiver for WW approved by TN DOE
10. 26 Feb – Additional public review day (included WW, but still no anchor texts)
11. 2 Mar – WCS Textbook Review committee, without ever having seen an anchor text, recommends WW for adoption (23 teachers, 11 parents)
12. 30 Mar – WCS Board votes 12-0 to adopt.

There were 105 days between the formation of the textbook adoption committee and their ultimate recommendation for curriculum adoption. The waiver for WW was approved on Day 95: Friday, Feb 21. Two working days later, a public review was held (where no WW anchor texts were present). Two working days after that, the committee recommended WW for adoption. If WCS textbook adoption was a 12 hour process, WW literally came on the scene in the 11th hour (10.85, to be exact).

M4L has questioned 11 out of 12 BOE members about the hasty adoption (Eric Welch, District 10, has refused to meet with his constituent members of our group). The most cited reason for voting for WW was: “It was ‘highly recommended’ by Ed Reports.org,” an organization steeped in social justice ideology, backed by the Gates Foundation, and carrying a reputation for selling a recommendation to the highest bidder. There are no program evaluations or actual research, per the federal government’s What Works Clearinghouse on the AskEric database, that shows WW is effective in the classroom. Nevermind the abysmal 2020-2021 TN TCAP scores, for which COVID was quickly blamed. COVID certainly did not help, but neither did a failed curriculum.

WIT & WISDOM WAS “APPROVED” BY THE STATE

I have heard Mr. Golden repeat this several times. In the end, yes, it was approved by the state. However the road to its “approval” was so corrupted that the TN State Assembly subsequently voted to strip the education commissioner of her waiver authority and her voting privileges on the state textbook commission.

It cannot be overstated that the Great Minds Wit & Wisdom ELA curriculum never passed TN state standards. It failed the first round of reviews in July 2019. At that point, the commissioner halted the review process indefinitely, dismissed the first-round reviewers, hired new reviewers, and had them conduct a re-review in September 2019. Only 2 reviewers replaced the original 5, and they conducted their assessments under the watchful eye of the DOE. Standard practice holds that reviewers independently conduct their reviews offsite and unobserved by state personnel. The commissioner hired Johns Hopkins to give a high level blessing of these dealings. And after all of that, WW *still* failed ALL grades, primarily due to lack of a phonics component. Again, an English Language Arts curriculum, supposedly superior due to its adherence to the “Science of Reading,” did not have something as basic as a phonics component for K-5th grade..

The DOE overruled the failing reviews for Grades 3-5 and promised a free supplemental curriculum to prop up Grades K-2. This unprecedented move bears repeating: the TN DOE became its own publisher in order to create free phonics curriculum so as to prop up a failing ELA curriculum.

McGraw-Hill’s Wonders passed the first and second reviews with no issues. Strangely, Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt found its 3rd grade curriculum failed due to one word in one sentence residing in one lesson. HMH filed a lawsuit to appeal this decision: not for financial damages, but for simple reconsideration. At least 7 schools applied for a waiver to use HMH. Those waivers were denied, and 60% of those schools went on to adopt the TDOE’s favored curriculum: Wit & Wisdom. Thirty-three waivers were granted for WW; nearly every one cited the “free material” as a reason to adopt. This equates to financial incentive in the form of a savings. For WCS, the approximate savings is \$565,989 per FOIA documents, nevermind the “70% off” incentive offered to WCS by Great Minds.

These processes are detailed in slides 143-162 of Attachment 6, and Attachments 8 and 9. The bottom line is that while WW may have been “waived in” by the state, it still failed to ever pass state standards. It is a failed curriculum that was not properly reviewed and rushed into WCS as a TDOE favorite with financial incentive.

As for the supplemental curriculum, many teachers were led to believe that WCS would adopt “Foundations” by Wilson Language Training, a proven program that they were enthusiastic about. Instead, WCS opted for the free “TN Foundational Skills Program.” It’s been described as “a mess.” You get what you pay for (or don’t pay for). The books had to be printed and copied to the tune of \$219,895.00 and will likely have to be printed again due to the poor quality (kids writing in them, tearing them, poor bindings, etc.). Teachers are familiar with “Foundations” (quoted at \$652K-\$785K), its proven track

record, and the research that proves its effectiveness. Even Wit and Wisdom recommends “Foundations” as a phonics component according to the Padlet (Attachment #4). There is no such track record or credibility for the hastily concocted free TDOE material. How does that speak to the priorities of WCS? Do not Williamson County children deserve the best, highest quality, and scientifically proven curriculum to teach them how to read and write? Did not Mr. Golden say to you that “Literacy is #1?”

SENATE BILL NO. 630

After the TN State Assembly became aware of the TN DOE Commissioner’s overreach and stripped her of waiver authority and voting privileges, they further took steps to address the total 74 waivers issued across Tennessee’s 95 counties. On May 18, 2021, the Governor signed into law Senate Bill 630 (Attachment 10), amending TCA 49-6-2206, relative to textbooks:

(c) Notwithstanding subsection (a), all English language arts textbooks and instructional materials must be aligned to Tennessee’s academic standards no later than January 1, 2023.

While this new law is currently in adjudication with the TN Attorney General, a co-sponsor of the bill informed M4L that WCS’s waiver for Wit & Wisdom will expire in January 2023. If this is true, why not dispense with the showboating and the 4.403 committee process, and simply, pro-actively, replace the curriculum now. Thus satisfying both Williamson County parents and Tennessee law, with an added bonus of Williamson County leading the way in making a stand for the kids.

FINAL REMARKS

Mr. Golden repeated the phrase “teachers know their students” several times. He fails to give proper credence and authority of the parent to know their child. It is the parent who has final authority over the raising and education of their child - not the teacher, and not WCS. Parents have entrusted the education (reading, writing, and arithmetic) of their children to public schools. However, ideological and age-inappropriate material, coupled with the literacy rates of TN children, and the exclusion of parents has resulted in a broken trust. The onus is on Mr. Golden to take steps to reestablish that trust in the school system that he oversees. A great first step would be to take parent concerns seriously and address the issue head on, instead of avoiding his decision-making responsibilities in favor of tying the issue up in a 4.403 process with cherry picked committee members and a vague timeline for adjudication.

The phrase “trust the process” was used multiple times by commissioners at the 12 July meeting. However, if the process had functioned appropriately, WW would not be present in any Tennessee county. Perhaps “trust but verify” would be a better approach going forward. The parents and grandparents of Moms for Liberty Williamson County are so appreciative of your concern in this matter. Thank you for your continued attention on the curriculum in Williamson County Schools.

Sincerely,

Robin Steenman
Chair, Moms for Liberty – Williamson County Chapter

10 Attachments:

1. Board Policy 4.403

2. Elementary Schools receiving 4.403 requests
3. 23 June 21 email from Juli Oyer
4. 26 July 21 email from Juli Oyer
5. Padlet from the 17 Feb 2019 Teacher PD Day
6. "Let's Talk Wit & Wisdom" presentation v4, CAO 30 Jul 21
7. M4L formal DOE complaint pursuant to TCA 49-6-10
8. Summary of 2019 ELA Textbook Adoption Review Results
9. Timeline and Background of 2019-2020 State ELA Adoption
10. SB630

Electronic Links to these attachments can be found at www.MFLWillco.org/WitWisdom