

# State Board of Education Adopts READER Act Public School Library Standards

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The Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) has adopted a set of standards to guide book vendors for public schools on what is appropriate material and provide transparency mechanisms for parents of children in those schools.

Public school libraries have become one of the more divisive issues in the current political landscape, with Texas passing a law during the 88th regular legislative session to address many of the issues with “sexually explicit material” in schools that have come to the forefront during those debates.

House Bill (HB) 900, also known as the READER Act, was authored and shepherded through the legislative process by state Rep. Jared Patterson (R-Frisco). Patterson has said the law’s aim is to prevent children from accessing “sexually explicit” materials in public school libraries by prohibiting vendors from selling library material that is rated as such.

The SBOE is tasked with setting curriculum stands for Texas public schools. It also reviews and adopts instructional materials and establishes graduation requirements, among other responsibilities.

In the lead-up to the SBOE vote, tensions were running high. Patterson and some members of the SBOE didn't see eye to eye on some of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) standards for HB 900 that were being presented.

The TSLAC standards, in collaboration with SBOE, must be adopted by January 1, 2024. The standards include prohibiting the selling of library material "rated sexually explicit" or "library material that is pervasively vulgar or educationally unsuitable." It requires the recognition that "obscene content is not protected by the First Amendment" and also "encourages schools to provide library catalog transparency."

Patterson went as far as penning a letter to "respectfully request every member of the SBOE vote to approve these first-ever mandatory collection development standards for our public schools at the December 13th meeting."

He again went on the offensive on social media. Patterson pointed to two SBOE members, Julie Pickren and LJ Francis, who he said "have refused to agree to support these standards which, for the first time ever, firmly place parental rights into mandatory policy while expressing there is no fundamental first amendment right to obscene content."

Pickren responded that she does "appreciate all the hard work by you, the mama bears, and grassroots passing HB 900," but her concern was that "a lot has been added to the Library Collection Document that has nothing to do with HB 900 and great parts of HB 900 have been omitted."

"You're wrong," Patterson said plainly. "Stop the grandstanding. Stop trying to manufacture an issue so you can appear more conservative than the rest of the board."

Patterson was not alone in his support for TSLAC's proposed HB 900 standards. The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) came out publicly in support of Patterson, saying in a press release that they "call on the SBOE to vote for the proposed draft rules to faithfully implement the law." The Republican Party of Texas also expressed support for the guidelines, even encouraging people to call and email their SBOE representatives and ask them to vote to approve the new standards.

The TSLAC standards were adopted by a vote of 13 to 1, with the lone vote against the measure coming from SBOE Member Aicha Davis of District 13.

"What started with concerned moms at the dinner table led to calls for local accountability and eventually, the passage of historic legislation, has now progressed into the first-ever mandatory library collection development standards," Patterson said in celebration after the

vote.

“This step ensures that The READER Act will begin protecting children from sexually explicit material by the January 1, 2024 deadline. TSLAC will adopt the approved standards on December 14th.”