

Book bans, curriculum subject of lawsuit against DoDEA

BY SARAH LADD
KENTUCKY LANTERN

Kentucky students are part of a federal lawsuit challenging U.S. Department of Defense policies that led to schools at Fort Campbell and other military bases removing books about slavery and civil rights.

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is one of the defendants as lawyers ask the court to block Trump administration executive orders related to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Filed Tuesday in the United States District Court for Eastern Virginia, the suit slams “system-wide censorship” that the plaintiffs say violates students’ First Amendment right to receive information.

American Civil Liberties Union chapters in Kentucky and Virginia are joining the national ACLU in filing the suit on behalf of 12 students from six families.

Students in fourth grade, kindergarten and pre-kindergarten at Fort Campbell’s Bar-

santi Elementary School are among the plaintiffs. Other plaintiffs are enrolled in schools in Virginia, Italy and Japan. They are among more than 67,000 students enrolled worldwide in schools run by the Department of Defense Education Activity.

Via executive order, Trump directed schools receiving federal funding to not teach “ideology that treats individuals as members of preferred or disfavored groups, rather than as individuals,” he also told the Armed Forces to dissolve DEI offices and directed all federal agencies to recognize only cisgender male and female identities.

In February, Clarksville Now, a news outlet in Clarksville, Tennessee, reported Fort Campbell librarians were busy “scrubbing for books that contain references to slavery, the civil rights movement and anything else related to diversity, equity and inclusion” in compliance with Trump’s orders.

Fort Campbell is an Army

base than spans the Kentucky-Tennessee border between Hopkinsville and Clarksville.

Fort Campbell schools also had to remove “bulletin boards that reference Black History Month and Black leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks,” according to Clarksville Now.

The ACLU lawsuit says Trump’s orders “censor references to slavery, civil rights, race, ethnicity, immigration, diversity, sexual orientation and gender identity.”

“While the government has broad discretion to populate public school libraries and create curricula, the First Amendment imposes guardrails to ensure removals are justified,” the brief says. “Public school districts cannot suppress educationally valuable books and materials about race and gender in public schools simply because a new presidential administration finds certain viewpoints on those topics to be politically incorrect.”

Corey Shapiro, legal director for the ACLU of Kentucky, said in a statement that students “have a right to receive an education that includes an open and honest dialogue about America’s history.”

“Censoring books and canceling assignments about the contributions of Black Americans is not only wrong, but antithetical to our First Amendment rights,” Shapiro said.

Being part of a military family does not erase students’ constitutional rights, said Emerson Sykes, a senior staff attorney with the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project, in a Tuesday statement. Sykes said that Defense Department schools “are some of the most diverse and high achieving in the nation, making it particularly insulting to strip their shelves of diverse books and erase women, LGBTQ people and people of color from the curriculum to serve a political goal. Our clients deserve better, and the First Amendment demands it.”

The ACLU says the Department of Defense has prohibited cultural awareness months — including Black History Month, Pride Month, Women’s History Month and National Hispanic Heritage Month — and that books reportedly removed include “The Kite Runner” by Khaled Hosseini and “Hillbilly Elegy” by Vice President J.D. Vance, as well as a preparation guide for the Advanced Placement psychology exam.

The Department of Defense Education Activity has not provided a response to the lawsuit.

The nation’s military academies also are under pressure from Hegseth’s office to eliminate DEI, prompting the Naval Academy to remove almost 400 books from its libraries. *The New York Times* reports that Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” a memoir of growing up Black in America, was removed while two copies of Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” remain on the shelves in Annapolis.

CHALK

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said. “And I want people who have been hurt to know that they still matter and are loved.”

Caring for people and making the world a better place is what drove Duye to work in the medical field.

“I think, honestly, opening up to someone whose close to you is the best step to take,” Duye said. “We meet people on their best or their worst days and at the end of the day, we find a way to help them.”

Making a surprise visit were workers from Commonwealth Health and Family Services.

According to Jerri Lynn, she and her friends saw the post on Facebook and wanted to show their support at the event.

“A lot of our job duties are working with abuse and neglect, and so we wanted to come and show our support and collaborate with other agencies,” Lynn said.

Lynn said she and her friends saw the sidewalk in front of the hospital drawn on in previous years but never knew what it was for.

“I thought it was just kids chalking things up or some certain group that did this. I didn’t really know the background on what this was,” Lynn said. “When I did find out, I was like, ‘We definitely got to be a part of this’ because I’m all about bonding with my team and being there for other community partners, too.”

Plans are to make this an annual event to participate, Lynn said.

“People feel like they’re alone and not knowing someone’s back story can



KODEE BRINEGAR/The News-Enterprise
During a Chalk the Walk event Wednesday, Taylor Thomas draws a message to raise awareness of sexual violence at the hospital in Elizabethtown.

contribute to that feeling,” Lynn said. “Everyone who has been a victim needs to know that they have support here in this community and we stand with them.”

Kodee Brinegar can be reached at 270-505-1413 or kbrinegar@thenewsenterprise.com.



Courtesy of Diana Stanton
Many messages were written Wednesday outside the Baptist Health Hardin Emergency Department during a Chalk the Walk event to raise awareness of sexual violence at the hospital in Elizabethtown.



Commonwealth Health and Family Services worker Bethy Moors draws Wednesday during a Chalk the Walk event to raise awareness of sexual violence at the hospital in Elizabethtown.
KODEE BRINEGAR/The News-Enterprise

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important to not just students but to facility and the community,” Sellars said. “The students are going to get recognized in May, but today is different than that.”

Sellars said the event Wednesday is about knowing they are signing a contract to work with Baptist Health Hardin.

“They’re going to go pro and they’re going to know that they are going to be a great partner with our partners at Baptist Health Hardin,” Sellars said. “They are going to be moving into that professional career and not just a career that has a high wage but that’s highly demanded.”

According to Sellars, he was able to witness a previous ECTC graduate go pro.

“My mom was diagnosed with colon cancer and we went up to Louisville and one of her nurses said she was an ECTC graduate,” Sellars said. “She talked about the great experience that she had here, and I got to see her going pro by working with my mom.”

It’s a day to celebrate the commitment that the graduates have in accomplishing their goals, Sellars said.

“Today is about celebrating the commitment we have to a key and core partner for us in our region to make sure that we’re giving students the skills they need so we can move them to that job and be professional and keep doing what they want to be doing,” Sellars said.

Jake Druen, Baptist Health Hardin executive director of human resources, said those who work directly with patients have a special place in the hospital’s heart.

“It’s a calling when someone chooses health care,” Druen said. “You’re choosing more than just a career,

you’re choosing more than just a career, you’re choosing to make a difference in people’s lives.”

Druen said when patients leave the hospital, they don’t talk much about the reason they were at the hospital but they talk about the way they interact with the employees.

“Our partnership with ECTC has been phenomenal and we get top-notch nurses every year, year after year,” Druen said. “We’re pumped that we have these students coming to join us.”

Despite not being in person, Gina Leigh, director of nursing at ECTC wrote a letter to the students congratulating them on their success.

“The decision to pursue a career in nursing was your first step toward becoming the change agent out world so deeply needs,” Nursing instructor Pamela Dodson said, reading from Leigh’s letter. “While I wish I could be there today to witness you take this important step to serve your patients community and profession at Baptist Health Hardin, I hope you know how proud I am seeing you reach this milestone and fulfill the dreams you set out to achieve is incredibly inspiring. Go out there and be exactly who you are and continue to inspire, just as

you have inspired me.”

Amanda Groce was one of the students who signed on to work with the medical group after graduation and she has been signed on to work in the Progressive Care Unit.

“PCU is a cardiac floor, and all of the patients on that floor are going to need continuous cardiac monitoring,” Groce said. “Me becoming a nurse has been in the making since I was 13 years old.”

Groce said she started nursing school 20 years ago, but she now is graduating at the age of 40.

“I’m a natural caregiver and I take care of everybody,” Groce said. “I feel like the Lord just placed it into my heart to lay my hands on the sick and heal.”

No one is ever too old to become a nurse, Groce said.

“I advise anyone going into nursing school to make it your top priority for the next two whole years,” Groce said. “It’s not the academic side that is challenging, but the mental gymnastics of being overwhelmed is the true challenge. You’re going to want to cry, quit and question yourself, just never give up.”

Kodee Brinegar can be reached at 270-505-1413 or kbrinegar@thenewsenterprise.com.

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