



WHQR Responds

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First, let me say I appreciate Reuel Sample and *The Wilmington Conservative* for offering me a chance to respond to Mr. Ibrahim's piece, "The Left's Insatiable Appetite to be Triggered: *WHQR's Disgraceful Attack on a Republican Parent.*" Ibrahim is writing about our recent report about a request for a district-wide ban of

the book *Blended* from elementary school classrooms and libraries; in that report, we asked Republican school board member Josie Barnhart if she was the parent in question, and she effectively punted, giving us a non-answer and declining to answer follow-ups. The following week, she acknowledged that she was the parent, but objected strongly to her name being "leaked" to the press.

Ibrahim is certainly entitled to his opinion on our reporting, and I don't think anyone – especially not TWC's audience – would be well served by me bickering with him over his claims that we are an unethical far-left Marxist propaganda machine. I stand by our reporting, and I laid out some of the reasons for that in my weekly newsletter this past [Sunday](#) (and if you read that, you'll find some of what I wrote repeated here). I'll also note that I've been in touch with Barnhart and hope to sit down with her for an interview when the book challenge process has resolved (which should be later this month).

So, instead, let me get to some of the meatier issues where we might have some productive conversation.

First, Ibrahim raises a point about Barnhart – which Barnhart spoke about with Nick Craig on his morning show – that she is "first and foremost a mother."

Some might call that a cop-out, but I take it seriously. One thing I've learned from reporting on this region for a decade is that the people in power in our town are still, in fact, *people*. That doesn't let them off the hook, and it's still journalists' job to hold them accountable, but I've learned to think long and hard before I put words on a page, or approve them as an editor. Would I say them to that person's face? What will I do when, inevitably, I run into them in public?

I also think that a lot of parents, many of them conservative, were unfairly pilloried as the parental rights movement built steam. I saw some activists call moms "Nazis" because

they didn't like Ibram X. Kendi. That's both intellectually lazy and further reduces the chances that we, as a community, will have useful discourse on anything.

That said, there is a difficult situation here: how should district policy handle someone who is both a parent and an elected official? Is there a meaningful difference between Barnhart taking appropriate means to engage with her child's education, questioning the appropriateness of a book that was given to her child, and her subsequent request to remove the book district-wide? I would argue there is.

At some point, Barnhart's challenge was destined to land in front of Superintendent Dr. Christopher Barnes, her employee, and then her colleagues on the school board. When Katie Gates challenged *Stamped*, she testified publicly, squaring off against New Hanover County Schools' top brass. As I've written elsewhere, whatever folks think of Gates' arguments, she certainly had the courage of her convictions. What would that look like for Barnhart? Would she step off the dais and stand behind the podium to voice her concerns? Recuse herself? Hire a proxy attorney (an offer also made to Gates)? Skip that particular board meeting?

I don't fault Barnhart for wanting to protect her child from material she found inappropriate – no one should. But in asking for a broader decision, in effect making a decision for *other* parents and other students, she set her private life on a collision course with her public role as vice-chair of the Board of Education. I don't fault her for that, but it's the irrevocable reality – the question is, how will the district deal with it?

As for the question of the book's merit – I'll reiterate that Barnhart ought to be commended for being engaged in her child's educational life, and taking the steps she thought were necessary. If she thought the book was inappropriate, she should – and did – take steps to protect her child. However the school-level committee rejected taking action beyond that, a decision upheld by the district-level committee.

Are there conservatives who feel *Blended* – like *Stamped* – offers a warped, racist, even anti-American view of the world? Yes, I've heard from them. Are there people who disagree, strongly, with that reading, and feel that the book represents the real-world concerns that young Black kids deal with all around the country? Of course. But it's worth noting that the current NHCS process was followed, and the book's value was upheld.

And then there's the question of our use of the word 'ban.' Many conservatives have taken issue with this, suggesting that we should say "removed by a process" or "restricted."

So, let me say two things. First, if you remove something from an institution or prohibit its general use, you can play all the semantic games you want, but that is a ban.

However, specificity matters: recently, a news outlet inaccurately reported that *Stamped* was banned from classrooms and libraries, when only the former is true – as Republican school board member David Perry quickly and correctly pointed out. The decision Barnes made on *Blended* last week, which allows the book across all middle and high schools, and in elementary schools for 4th and 5th grades with parental permission, doesn't strike me as a broad "ban." And – if that decision holds – I think it would be appropriate to refer to it as a "restriction," not a ban.

Second, and I say this with love, it's a little disappointing to see conservatives so eager to police language. I'm the first to acknowledge the silliness of the left's obsessive attempts to enforce double-plus correct lingo, especially those who spend more time on that than actual policy action. And, by the same token, one of the strengths of the conservatives I know has been calling a spade a spade.

Lastly, there's the suggestion that our "hit piece" – as Ibrahim and others have called it – was only published because of our desire to drag a Republican through the mud. I'll politely remind Ibrahim that I did not hear Republicans call our work "hit pieces" when it cast a critical light on Democratic politicians and candidates (just to name a few: Jason Minnicozzi, Rebecca Zimmer Donaldson, Julia Olson-Boseman, Ben David, Ed McMahon, Jonathan Barfield, and Charlie Rivenbark, back when he was a Dem). Notably, many of those stories were based at least in part on leaks, often from people who skirted or even broke policy to get information to the press. I'm not speaking about Ibrahim here, but in my general experience, the opprobrium of "leakers" (or conversely, praise for "whistleblowers") often has more to do with whether or not you like the story, and less with a principled stance.

"Would it have garnered a single inch of column space if Josie were a progressive activist voicing concerns about traditional literature," Ibrahim asked.

Actually, yes. I can tell you, as a former English professor who did my Ph.D. on some fairly controversial books (and also, may the saints protect me, White male authors), I've had plenty of debates with folks who would like to eject many of the great writers of Western literature from our canon, from Virgil to Philip Roth. If someone were trying to purge one of those books from our university or public schools, I'd certainly take an interest.

I've seen suggestions that conservative parents should fear that "we will come for you next," and as I've said elsewhere, I understand that concern, given our hyper-partisan environment. But WHQR is not a keyboard warrior on Bluesky, and we have no interest in what parents do with regard to their children's reading material. If someone is pursuing a district-wide book ban – sorry, *a district-level process to remove a book or otherwise*

restrict access to it – then, yeah, we’ll be interested. If parents want to make decisions that affect other parents, that crosses from the private sphere into the realm of public policy – which is what we report on.