



BILL LEE
GOVERNOR

STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NINTH FLOOR, ANDREW JOHNSON TOWER
710 JAMES ROBERTSON PARKWAY
NASHVILLE, TN 37243-0375

PENNY SCHWINN
COMMISSIONER

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Leader Johnson,

A recent news article indicated that you had concerns about *Wit and Wisdom* curriculum and critical race theory (CRT), and I am reaching out to share more information. I appreciate our working relationship and your leadership in the General Assembly, and I commend your advocacy for Tennessee children. I address three issues below with the hope of providing clarity to a complicated matter: the curriculum approval process, *Wit and Wisdom* and legislation to address CRT.

Parents have every right to question the reasoning or process behind the content being taught in Tennessee classrooms. Materials come into the classroom through a variety of channels, but districts ultimately make selections. While the department evaluates materials for academic standards, we believe parents provide important oversight into how sensitive or controversial subjects are approached.

Curricula Selection and Approval Process

State entities share a role in approving core curricula (primary textbooks and instructional materials) for districts to select from as meeting the state's academic standards. However, it is individual school districts that ultimately select textbooks and instructional materials used in their districts—either from the state-approved list or by receiving a waiver for alternative curricula.

The state has no role in the selection or use of supplemental materials. Supplemental materials (additional resources used in classrooms and schools to add to the adopted materials) are selected and chosen at the local level, and often at the classroom level.

A brief outline of state roles is listed below:

- **Tennessee Textbook Commission:** State body tasked with reviewing and selecting core instructional materials for the state-approved curricula list. The Tennessee Textbook Commission does not select materials for districts.
- **State Board of Education (SBE):** State body owning the final approval of curricula selections made by the Textbook Commission. The SBE assesses whether materials meet Tennessee state academic standards and does not assess matters like bias or sensitivity.
- **Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE):** Districts are also allowed to apply to TDOE for waivers to use other textbooks not on the state-approved list. To qualify, districts must show how they will supplement content for any partially covered or missing standards that would preclude such materials from being approved through the normal process.

Wit and Wisdom Curricula

Recently, parents have expressed concerns about the *Wit and Wisdom* curricula that is currently used by some districts. I reviewed the process for *Wit and Wisdom*, and it was approved by the Textbook Commission for grades 3-8 as meeting academic standards. This curriculum was then sent on to the State Board of Education, in keeping with the normal review and approval process. *Wit and Wisdom* lacked a phonics component that is necessary for approval in grades K-2; therefore, it is only on the state approved list for grades 3-8.

However, in the last approval cycle, several districts applied for and received waivers to use textbooks that did not meet the foundational skills components - including *Wit and Wisdom* - in those early grades. This is allowable under law and is a common practice to grant districts more flexibility so long as the district proposes a supplement to the curriculum that fully covers Tennessee state standards. To receive the waiver, districts had to demonstrate their ability to provide the additional standards missing in *Wit and Wisdom* (or any of the other textbooks where waivers were granted) for applicable grades levels. It's important to note that this waiver review did not delve into bias or appropriateness issues but was strictly limited to evaluating coverage of Tennessee's academic standards.

Critical Race Theory in the Classroom

Recent legislation tasked TDOE with building a framework to prevent propaganda like critical race theory from being taught in Tennessee classrooms. The department is in the process of building this framework. We acknowledge the challenges that exist in balancing the state's current process for curricula approval but are committed to enforcing the CRT law as the legislature designed it.

As parents and constituents share concerns about specific curricula, they will have an opportunity to express these concerns directly to the department. We look forward to communicating more about this process ahead of the new school year. The mission of the department continues to focus on making sure Tennessee students are the most academically prepared students in the country who are ready for life beyond the classroom.

Of course, please feel free to share this with colleagues if that is at all helpful. Thank you for your partnership, and please let me know if we can provide further information.

Respectfully,



Penny Schwinn, Commissioner
Department of Education