

Hi Kim and Commissioner Edelblut,

We're publishing a story that says as Commissioner of Education, Frank Edelblut has leveraged the Department of Education's oversight powers to pursue grievances against the public education system and individual educators.

It will include several examples, including instances where you suggested that certain books be removed from libraries, scrutinized teacher powerpoints, questioned teacher instruction materials and relayed a complaint about the use of "Indigenous People's Day" instead of "Columbus Day" on a school calendar.

We understand that Commissioner Edelblut is declining to sit down for an interview for this story, and that DOE is requiring all questions regarding Richard Farrell to go through its communications office, and we will note that in our reporting. Our questions for Commissioner Edelblut are listed below.

Your role as commissioner / DOE policies

- Could you please characterize how you view your role as Education Commissioner when it comes to oversight power?
- As commissioner, what role - if any - do you play in shaping what ideas students are exposed to in public schools?
- Some school officials told us your inquiries can be intimidating, given the position of power you hold. What is your expectation when you reach out to a district about a parent or citizen's concern?
- Some educators also say reaching out about specific material related to race or LGBTQ issues are undermining efforts to make public schools welcoming to everyone. How do you respond to that?
- We have documented several instances where you have directed a complaint from a concerned parent or citizen to Richard Farrell. How do you decide which complaints merit an inquiry by the department's misconduct investigator?
- When you receive concerns directly from parents, how do you decide which one merits a conversation between you and a school leader?
- Does Rich Farrell conduct initial inquiries for every case he receives? If not, what is the threshold for him to contact a district about a complaint?
- Terese Bastarche, founder of We The People NH, said she communicates with you regularly, and you have encouraged her to organize parents around concerns about books and other material. She told us: "He actually in conversation said: 'I really want to fight this fight for the parents. And I just need there to be more attention brought to it so that when I go to fight the fight, I'll have some more support.'" What fight were you referring to?
- After serving in your role, do you still believe in local control of schools?
- Do you believe you have fulfilled the promise you made during your confirmation hearing to remain nonpartisan?

- When do you believe you have the authority to overrule a decision by a superintendent or local school board?

Book Concerns

- Do you have a list of books that you believe should be restricted in school libraries? If so, would you share the list? If not, how do you gauge which books are inappropriate for students?
- You've asked administrators in Dover and Hanover to justify the use of Gender Queer, All Boys Aren't Blue and Boy Toy in their school libraries. How did you select those books for closer review?
- In letters to Dover and Hanover regarding the above books, you wrote: "As you know, there is a very serious child mental health issue that we are all concerned about and working on. Exposure to developmentally inappropriate materials has the effect of exacerbating those mental health issues that students are struggling with." How do those books, in your view, harm students' mental health?
- On January 30, 2023, you called a meeting with school librarians, parents and one state lawmaker. What was your goal for that meeting?
- How did you select the participants?
- Your office provided a copy of the materials distributed at the meeting, which included passages from New Hampshire's obscenity laws and excerpts from frequently banned books. Why were those relevant for the conversation? Why did your office mark the materials as confidential?
- Of the books highlighted in the handout, which, if any, have you read cover to cover?
- One librarian characterized the meeting as an 'attack' — how would you characterize it?
- Several people told NHPR that you asked why you couldn't unilaterally decide which books are inappropriate for school libraries. Why did you ask that? Do you believe you should have that power?
- Those in the room also said you suggested that you could enlist the help of the Attorney General's office, and get a judge to order books removed. Where in the law does it say you can justify that decision?
- Have you ever asked the NH Attorney General for help removing a book from a school?
- Have you ever asked Sora / Overdrive to remove or add certain books from New Hampshire school collections? If so, which ones did you ask to restrict or add, and what was the company's response?

Exeter / SAU 16

- The school superintendent said that, in fall 2023, you told her that it could be a big problem for her if she didn't include Columbus Day in the school calendar. Why would that be a problem?
- The superintendent said you told her you received a complaint about the name of the holiday. Is it appropriate for the Education Commissioner to get involved in local decisions about a school calendar?

Hanover / SAU 70

- How long have you known Dan Richards, who in September 2022 complained about the SAU70 middle school library promoting Banned Books Week? How often do you communicate with him, and on what matters?
- In emails obtained by NHPR through open records requests with SAU70 and your agency, Richards called for Hanover police to investigate the school for a violation of New Hampshire's obscenity law. In what situations, if any, do you believe a school or educator should be charged under that law?
- Why did Richards' complaint about the Banned Books Week display merit an inquiry by Rich Farrell?
- SAU70 Superintendent Jay Badams said you later reached out to let him know "Flamer" was available in the district's online library. Why did you think it was important to alert Badams about that?
- Badams said he tried to work with the online library provider, Overdrive, to reclassify the book for high school students. In an email provided by your agency, Rich Farrell wrote that doing so would not "solve Frank's problem or concerns." What did you communicate with Farrell related to this incident?
- We have been told that the book is no longer available in the state's online library. Do you know why? Did you ask for it to be removed?

Henniker / SAU 24

- SAU 24 Superintendent Jackie Coe said Rich Farrell contacted her in 2021 with a complaint about a social studies teacher using "Stamped from the Beginning." She said Farrell indicated he was looking into this because you asked him to - why did you want him to look into this?
- Your agency did not open a formal investigation into that complaint, but you continued to highlight concerns about that book in public forums — including your April 2022 op-ed, "Education's Sacred Trust," which included photos of the books at issue in SAU24. Why did you continue to raise concerns about the books?
- Some educators say that your agency's pursuit of complaints about books that deal with racism has diverted attention away from dealing with racist acts against students of color — for example, the racist graffiti incident that occurred in the SAU24 high school bathroom in 2022. At what point did you become aware of that incident?
- Why didn't you take any action or speak out about that incident?
- Coe said that while her district was trying to address concerns around school culture and climate, they were left wondering: "is the message [that] we're not supposed to be talking about slavery?" What message were you hoping to send by raising concerns about "Stamped from the Beginning" being used in local classrooms?

Hinsdale / SAU 92

- A staff member at Hinsdale School District said you called the superintendent in 2022 about a training related to LGBTQ students. Why did you make that call?
- The staffer who was organizing the training said that she changed the topic of the training after learning you reached out to her superintendent. She said she later spoke

with you directly, and told her you were not directing her to cancel the workshop. But she said she was concerned after knowing that the commissioner of education was calling about the workshop. How did you expect your call to influence the substance of the training?

Bedford / SAU 25

- Superintendent Mike Fournier said you called him with a complaint you received from a guardian about a picture book read aloud at a Bedford elementary school, “In Our Mothers’ House,” which featured a family with two moms. Why did this merit a call to the school district?
- Fournier said you also called based on rumors about the school’s policies for transgender students, but you had inaccurate information. Why did this merit a call to the district?
- Fournier also said your approach of calling superintendents with such concerns, rather than encouraging people to work directly with their local district, goes against New Hampshire’s ethos of local control and erodes trust. What is your response?

Nashua / SAU 42

- Kamren Munz was a teacher at Elm Street Middle School in Nashua until summer of 2022. You cited material from their class in your April 2022 op-ed titled “Education’s Sacred Trust.” In what way did that material violate some family’s values?
- Munz says that your op-ed targeted them unfairly, made them feel unsafe, and was one of the things that prompted them to leave the teaching profession, in the summer of 2022. What’s your response?
- In your opinion, how should transgender educators introduce themselves to students? If they use nonbinary pronouns, such as they or them, should they explain what those mean?
- Is it appropriate for teachers to talk about LGBTQ identities in the classroom?
- Is it appropriate for a teacher to say “Black Lives Matter” in classroom materials?
- Is it ever appropriate for teachers to ask students what pronouns they use?
- Is it ever appropriate for teachers to ask students whether it’s OK to share their pronouns with their family at home?
- Why did the NH DOE not open a formal investigation into Kamren Munz in spring 2022?
- Has the NH DOE opened formal investigations into educators for sharing a non-academic survey without parental consent?
- How does the NH DOE differentiate between non-academic surveys per RSA 186:11, IX-d and other getting-to-know-you questions/activities?
- This is a follow-up to a question between Bill Chapman and NH DOE lawyers: The records from the NH DOE, sent this week, show emails from Erin Prowker to the Nashua administration. How did NH DOE come into the possession of Prowker’s emails? She said she did not contact the state.