

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
BEFORE THE SOUTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL
REVIEW COMMITTEE

IN RE: KINGDOM OF ASH BY SARAH
J. MAAS

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

This is a matter in which Instructional Material is being addressed by the Instructional Material Review Committee (“IMRC”) of the S.C. State Board of Education (“State Board”) pursuant to S.C. Code Reg. 43-170. The hearing of this matter occurred via Microsoft Teams on March 13th, 2025 at 1:00 PM.

Title of Instructional Material:
Author:

Kingdom of Ash
Sarah J. Maas

BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The “Subject Material” listed above is reviewed by the IMRC pursuant to its authority to review materials that have been appealed from a local district board. In this case, Complainant filed the South Carolina Instructional Materials Uniform Parent Complaint Form (Exhibit A) with the Beaufort School District Board of Education on January 17th, 2025. The Chairman of the Beaufort Board requested that the State Board of Education take these materials up for consideration, pursuant to Regulation 43-170 VI.C., as the Beaufort Board had previously reviewed this material in 2023, prior to the enactment of Regulation 43-170. As further described below, this Regulation authorizes the State Board to take certain actions related to Instructional Material. The Complainant requested that the State Board remove the Subject Material entirely from South Carolina’s public schools.

The Department notified the public of this matter via posting hearing information and the hearing agenda on its website on March 6, 2025. Consistent with governing requirements, the public was invited to sign up in advance of the hearing in order to provide comment regarding the Subject Material. The Hearing was conducted in accordance with Procedures for Review of Instructional Material, State Board Rule of Governance IFC, last revised October 1, 2024, and the South Carolina Administrative Procedures Act, S. C. Code Section 1-23-310 et. seq. The State Board’s Rule of Governance was designed and adopted to provide a full and fair process for Instructional Material reviews under Reg. 43-170.

Based on a review of all public comments (in person and written), the Subject Material, all documentation provided by the Complainant and interested parties, the IMRC makes the following findings of fact and conclusions of law.

APPEARANCES

Report and Recommendation
Kingdom of Ash

Complainant providing testimony in favor of removing the Subject Material:

Elizabeth “Ivie” Szalai

Providing public comment in favor of retaining the Subject Material:

Lindsey Hiller

On Behalf of South Carolina Department of Education:

Robert D. Cathcart, III, Esq., Policy and Legal Advisor

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Subject Material was challenged by the Complainant in the Beaufort County School District on January 17th, 2025.
2. Beaufort County School District Officials informed Complainant that the Board had previously considered the Subject Material and returned the material to its shelves. The Chairman of the Beaufort County School District Board of Education requested the State Board of Education to review the material without the Beaufort Board reviewing the Subject Material under the Regulation.
3. The Subject Material is available to students in the Beaufort County School District.
4. The Subject Material contains the content listed and described in Exhibit A¹.

APPLICABLE LAW

1. Regulation 43-170 authorizes the State Board to take certain actions related to Instructional Material. The State Board can (1) remove the Subject Material entirely, (2) discontinue use of the Subject Material for any grade level or age group for which such use is inappropriate or unsuitable, (3) limit the Subject Material’s availability to a student where the school district has received the consent of the student’s parent, or (4) permit the continued use of the Subject Material for all grade levels or age groups.

2. Regulation 43-170 defines “Instructional Material(s)”:

“Instructional Material(s)” means materials used in a South Carolina K-12 public school classroom, made available in a public school library/media center, or included on a public school’s reading list, whether adopted and/or purchased from the state-adopted instructional materials list, adopted and/or purchased through a district instructional materials program, or otherwise purchased, donated to the school, or made available to students through other means, including but not limited to digital platforms. See S.C. Code Ann. Section 59–19–10. The term “Instructional Materials” as used herein includes any collection of books or materials purchased, acquired, or kept on public school grounds by any teacher or other public-school employee and made available to students, regardless of how or by whom such materials are acquired or purchased.

Reg. 43-170(I)(A).

¹ Exhibit A contains excerpts which are representative of questionable or violative material contained in the Subject Material. The IMRC’s review, report, and recommendation is not limited to the excerpts listed on Exhibit A.

3. Regulation 43-170 defines “Age and Developmentally Appropriate”:

“Age and Developmentally Appropriate” means topics, messages, materials, and teaching methods suitable to particular ages or age groups of children and adolescents, based on developing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacity typical for the age or age group. Instructional Material is not “Age and Developmentally Appropriate” for any age or age group of children if it includes descriptions or visual depictions of “sexual conduct,” as that term is defined by Section 16-15-305(C)(1).

4. Regulation 43-170 authorizes the State Board to establish “a committee comprised of at least five of the State Board’s members... [and to] conduct a public meeting” consistent with the Regulation’s requirements. Reg. 43-170(IV)(E). Furthermore, it requires the committee to “provide a report and recommendation to the full State Board to be considered and either adopted or rejected by the State Board at its next regularly scheduled meeting.” *Id.*

RECOMMENDATION

The State Board has established that, when Instructional Material “present[s] plainly before the reader express, detailed... descriptions of ‘sexual conduct’ as specifically defined in Code sections 16-15-305 (C)(1)(b), (d), and (e),” it is a clear violation of Regulation 43-170 and the Subject Material must be removed entirely from all public school in South Carolina. *See* SBE Final Order and Opinion No. 2024-0001 (In re: Damsel by Elena Arnold) at page 3. Having carefully considered all public comments (in person and written), the Subject Material and/or excerpts in question from the Subject Material, all documentation provided by the Department, and all comments made by those appearing before the IMRC, we unanimously find that the Subject Material includes descriptions of “sexual conduct” as that term is defined by S.C. Code § 16-15-305(C)(1).

While the IMRC’s review of the Subject Material is not limited to Exhibit A, the excerpts contained therein establish a clear violation of the regulation. Therefore, the Subject Material is not Age and Developmentally Appropriate as defined by S.C. Code Reg. 43-170 and must be removed entirely from all public schools in South Carolina.

The IMRC recommends that, considering all the circumstances *Kingdom of Ash* by Sarah J. Maas be removed entirely from all public schools in South Carolina, beginning on the date of the signing of any Final Order issued by the South Carolina State Board of Education.

/s/Dr. Christian T. Hanley, Jr.

Christian T. Hanley, Jr.

Chairman

Instructional Material Review Committee

January 25, 2025



South Carolina Instructional Materials Uniform Parent Complaint Form

Your Name: Elizabeth Szalai

Title & Author of Contested Material (one per form):
Kingdom of Ash by Sarah J. Maas

School Where Contested Material is Located: Bluffton High School, Hilton Head Island High School

Location of Contested Material (library, classroom, etc.): Library

Contested Material is (select one): ☒ Printed ☐ Audio/Visual ☐ Online Resource
☐ Other (please describe):

I request that this Contested Material be (choose one of the following):

- ☒ Removed from all schools/facilities in this District.
- ☐ Restricted to the following grade levels in this District:
- ☐ Restricted to a student whose parent/legal guardian provides consent and is enrolled in the following grade levels in this District:

Describe Your Reason for Contesting This Material (attach additional pages as needed):

This book contains explicit sexual activities in violation of Regulation 43-170 specifically licking/sucking of breast, description of sexual intercourse, and climax.
Please refer to specific passages below with associated page numbers.

January 1/5

I, Elizabeth Szalai (insert your name), hereby certify that:

- I am a parent or legal guardian of a student who attends a school within this District.
- I have read, watched, or otherwise reviewed the material I am contesting.
- I have made a good faith effort to address my concerns with School or District staff.
- I have not filed more than five (5) instructional material complaints (including this complaint) in this calendar month.
- I believe that this Contested Material is not suitable for use, availability, and/or unrestricted access in this District, pursuant to the requirements and definitions in Regulation 43-170, which are summarized on the following instruction page.

Signature: [Signature] Date: 1/17/25
1/1/25

Kingdom of Ash

By Sarah J Maas

Available at the following schools:

Bluffton High School

Hilton Head Island High School

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains explicit sexual activities.

Page 349

(Violates the Regulation with licking/sucking of breast, description of sexual intercourse, and climax.)

She smiled despite that truth. "I'm ready to be kissed again, Prince."

He let out a dark chuckle and muttered, "Thank the gods," before he lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was gentle—light. Letting her decide how to guide it. So she did.

Sliding her arms around Rowan's neck, Aelin pressed herself against him, arching into his touch as his hands roamed along her back. Yet his mouth remained featherlight on hers.

Sweet, exploratory kisses. He'd do it all night, if that was what she wished.

Mate. He was her mate, and she was finally...With a growl, Rowan swept her into his arms, never tearing his mouth from hers as he carried her to the bed and set her down gently. Off came their boots, their jackets and shirts and pants. And then he was with her, the strength and heat of him pouring into her bare skin.

She couldn't touch him fast enough, feel enough of him against her. Even when his mouth roved down her neck, licking over that spot where his claiming marks had been. Even when he roamed farther, worshipping her breasts as she arched up into each lick and suckle. Even when he knelt between her legs, his shoulders spreading her thighs wide, and tasted her, over and over, until she was writhing beneath him.

But something primal in her went quiet and still as Rowan rose over her again, and their eyes locked.

"You're my mate," he said, the words near-guttural. He nudged at her entrance, and she shifted her hips to draw him in, but he remained where he was. Withholding what she ached for until he heard what he needed.

Aelin tipped back her head, baring her neck to him. "You're my mate." Her words were a breathless rush. "And I am yours."

Rowan thrust into her in a mighty stroke as he plunged his teeth into the side of her neck.

She cried out at the claiming, release already barreling along her spine, but he began moving.

Moving, while his teeth remained in her, and she moaned with each drive of his hips, the sheer size of him a decadence she would never be able to get enough of. She dragged her nails down his muscled back, then lower, feeling every powerful stroke of him into her. Rowan withdrew his teeth from her neck, and Aelin claimed his mouth in a savage kiss, her blood a coppery tang on his tongue.

He went wild at that, hoisting her hips to angle himself deeper, harder. The world might have been burning around them for all she cared, all he cared, too.

“Together, Aelin,” he promised, and she heard the rest of the words in every place their bodies joined. Together they would face this, together they would find a way.

Release crested within her once more, a shimmering brightness.

And just when it broke, Aelin sank her teeth into Rowan’s neck, claiming him as he’d claimed her.

His blood, powerful and wind-kissed, filled her mouth, her soul, and Rowan roared as release shattered through him, too.

For long minutes, they lay tangled in each other.

Page 537

(Violates Regulation with stroke of genital through pants and descriptions of intercourse.)

He ran his fingers over the scar. Over it, and then up her stomach. Up and up, her skin pebbling beneath his touch, until he halted just over her heart. Until he laid his palm flat against it, the curve of her breast rising to meet his hand with each unsteady breath she took.

...So Dorian brushed his mouth against hers. Manon let out a small sound.

Dorian kissed her again, and her tongue met his, hungry and searching. Then her hands were plunging into his hair, both of them rising onto their knees to meet halfway.

She moaned, her hands sliding from his hair down his chest, down to his pants. She stroked him through the material, and Dorian groaned into her mouth.

Time spun out, and there was only Manon, a living blade in his arms. Their pants joined their shirts and jackets on the ground, and then he was laying her upon his bedroll.

Manon drew her hands from him to remove the glittering crown atop her head, but he halted her with a phantom touch. “Don’t,” he said, voice near-guttural. “Leave it on.”

Her eyes turned to molten gold, going heavy-lidded as she writhed, tipping her head back.

His mouth went dry at the beauty that threatened to undo him, the temptation that his every instinct roared to claim. Not the body, but what she had offered.

He almost said yes, then.

Was almost selfish enough, greedy enough for her, that he nearly said yes. Yes, he would take her as his queen. So he might never have to say farewell to this, so that this magnificent, fierce witch might remain by his side for all his days.

Manon reached for him, fingers digging into his shoulders, and Dorian rose over her, finding her mouth in a plundering kiss.

A shift of her hips, and he was buried, the heated silk of her enough to make him forget that they had a camp around them, or kingdoms to protect.

He did not bother with phantom touches. He wanted her all for himself, skin to skin.

Every thrust into her, Manon answered with a rolling, demanding movement of her own.

Stay. The word echoed in each breath.

Dorian took one of her legs and hefted it higher, angling him closer. He groaned at the perfection of it, and Manon swallowed the sound with a kiss of her own, a hand clamping on his backside to propel him harder, faster.

Dorian gave Manon what she wanted. Gave himself what he wanted. Over and over and over.

Manon's breathing was as ragged as Dorian's when they pulled apart at last.

She could barely move her limbs, barely get down enough air as she gazed at the tent ceiling.

Dorian, as spent as she, didn't bother to try to speak.

Page 570

(Violates the Regulation with description of rubbing between her thighs.)

Though unlike those months this spring, when Aelin set down her plate between her feet, she slid her arms around Rowan's neck and his mouth instantly met hers.

No, it was certainly not at all like their time at Mistward as she crawled into Rowan's lap, not entirely caring that anyone might stride up or down the stairs, and kissed him silly.

They halted, breathless and wild-eyed, before she could decide that it really wouldn't be a bad idea to unfasten his pants right there, or that his hand, discreetly and lazily rubbing that damned spot between her thighs, should be inside her.

Page 830

(Violates the Regulation with descriptions of intercourse.)

Rowan had taken the time last night to reacquaint her with certain parts of that body.

And his own. Had spent a long while doing so, too. Until that haunted look had vanished, until she was writhing beneath him, burning while he moved in her. He hadn't stopped his tears from falling, even when they'd turned to steam before they hit her body, and there had been tears on her own face, bright as silver in the flame, while she'd held him tight.

Yet this morning, when he'd nuzzled her awake with kisses to her jaw, her neck, that haunted look had returned. And lingered.