

Follett Reverses Course on Parental Controls for Customers Facing Censorship Legislation

By Shannon Maughan |
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Following a week of harsh criticism—including a Twitter firestorm and a petition circulated by school librarians, educators, and authors—Follett School Solutions has scrapped any plans for a potential parental control module for its Destiny Library Manager software, which would have apprised parents of their child's book selections and enable parents to limit student access to materials they deemed inappropriate. Britten Follett, CEO of content at Follett School Solutions, and Paul Isle, CEO of software, released a joint statement on April 1 announcing the turnaround.

The company had been exploring the development of parental monitoring tools in recent weeks, at the request of customers looking for support in states where various types of censorship/parents' rights bills are being introduced.

"Back in February, we were contacted by, at this point, it's a list of about 30 customers, in districts across Florida, Texas, and Georgia," Britten Follett said. "Librarians are highly concerned that the law that has passed in Florida [the "Parental Rights in Education" bill] and the potential legislation that is now facing 21 different states is putting a lot of risk on them when parents are asking for additional insight into what their students are checking out. Parents are requesting the option to get into Destiny and to block certain titles from being accessed by their students."

Britten Follett said that those initial customer requests were the springboard for conversations with districts about Destiny's current features and potential new tools that might be able to provide support. "We had no roadmap, we had no product feature list, we had no go-to-market strategy," she said. "These were just conversations."

But word of those conversations spread when the *Forsyth County News* in Georgia [ran a story on March 11](#) about the local school district's efforts to help address community concerns about books containing "sexually explicit" content. During a school board meeting, district leaders outlined the changes, which including pursuing potential changes to Destiny, the software used in Forsyth County Schools. "I understand why they did that," Britten Follett said. "[District leaders] were trying to say, 'these are the things that we're trying to do to help quell the concerns of the parents in our district and we're talking to Follett.'"

Librarians' reactions to possible new Destiny capabilities mentioned in the Georgia story grew louder in recent days, with many of them taking to Twitter to passionately voice their concerns about student privacy and the harm that monitoring tools would pose for more vulnerable students, especially those in the LGBTQA community. Some threatened taking their business elsewhere.

Follett responded to the outcry by posting a letter about the steps they'd been taking and scheduling a now-canceled webchat, which was to be held April 4. Of the mounting tension, Britten Follett noted: "If we had put our message out there that this was something we were going to do, then you own it. But it really spiraled out of control prematurely, because these were literally internal conversations we were having with our customers to try to determine how we can help them navigate what's an extremely difficult time in education."

Britten Follett mentioned that her company is sensitive to the fact that librarians are “trying to defend the bill of rights that they signed up for when they became librarians. The librarians in those states that are going through this right now, they’re scared for their careers. They don’t want to do something wrong. They want to attempt to comply with what parents are asking for, but at the same time defend the student’s right to explore topics that they want to read or research in the library.”

After what she said was “an extremely difficult week,” Britten Follett said: “I think what’s abundantly clear is that these types of parental controls built into Destiny are not in the best interests of our customers at this point.” She noted that numerous discussions with industry partners and librarians “in states that are impacted and ones that aren’t” led to the decision to not pursue any development of the module. “Follett has been committed to supporting libraries for 150 years,” she added. “We have given our time and treasure to building up the role of the librarian. I would just hope that we turn all of this energy into something positive to change the conversation around getting books in the hands of kids, which is truly what all of our missions are.”