

## Discus and Berkeley County Schools: A summary of public records

August 4, 2025

On February 26, 2025, the ACLU of South Carolina submitted a request under the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act for written correspondence among district officials involving Discus and the decision to block it. The district provided those records on April 17. Over the summer, the ACLU-SC sought clarity from district officials on their decisionmaking process and received no new information.

Highlights from those records are now [available via Documentcloud](#). A summary of the findings is available below, with links to the relevant documents.

1. **Berkeley County School District left educators in the dark.** [Teachers and librarians](#), [principals](#), and [parents](#) all wrote to the school district office in February asking why Discus access was cut off and received no further details than the general public.
2. **When recommending alternatives to Discus, district officials suggested unreliable sources that were not vetted for age-appropriateness.** District officials recommended that teachers and students use sweetsearch.com, Google Scholar, or [“the hyperlinked list of cited resources at the bottom of a search on Wikipedia.”](#) Parents and teachers responded that these were [not adequate replacements](#). The director of the State Library, which oversees Discus, wrote in an email that [“None of these resources are remotely comparable to the quality of resources provided by and through Discus.”](#) District officials also expressed reservations, including on 2/20/2025 when one wrote that “Sweetsearch probably isn’t going to be good either” after she [searched the website for the word “smut.”](#)
3. **High-ranking district officials seemed caught off guard by the decision to block Discus, and when asked, they gave confusing and contradictory answers.** Between Feb. 7 and 11, Deputy Superintendent Karen Whitley and Chief Officer of Academics and Innovation Dr. Susan Gehlmann [exchanged text messages](#) about how to respond to inquiries about loss of Discus access. On 2/25/2025, the director of the State Library wrote to Berkeley County School Board members: “I have been [unable to get specific information](#) about why Discus was blocked, what the issues are, and how we may resolve it. Without this information we are unable to find a solution and move forward.”
4. **The rationale for blocking Discus remains unclear.** At various points in the email correspondence, officials gave a variety of reasons, including:
  - a. *The state book banning rule, Regulation 43-170.* This policy, pushed by State Superintendent Ellen Weaver and adopted in 2024, enables prospective book bannings to remove books from classrooms and libraries statewide if they contain a description of “sexual conduct.” As early as September 2024, in response to an inquiry from Berkeley County, state Department of Education employee Mark Herring [asked how to block access](#) to information on Discus that was “not in compliance” with Regulation 43-170. On 2/5/2025, a State Library leader told a BCSD employee that her department was “monitoring the decisions made by the Department of Education regarding [book banning](#) and the effect, if any, on

Discus." On 2/24/2025, the director of the State Library wrote to Berkeley County School Board members after attending a meeting with district officials about the district blocking student access to Discus: "However, that meeting did not provide much information other than the Berkeley County School District was [concerned about being in compliance with South Carolina Regulation 43-170](#)."

- b. *Obscene content.* The Berkeley County School District Instructional Technology Director wrote on 2/6/2025 that she and a school librarian searched Discus for content that she said "[would not pass the obscenity law](#)," including entries in the Britannica Elementary online encyclopedia.
- c. *A Facebook post.* On 2/6/2025, a district employee wrote to the director of the State Library, "The BCSD community has brought up some concerns regarding the following concepts being accessible on Discus – [pornography, late term abortion, whistleblowers, and Al-Qaida specifically](#)." When the State Library official asked to see the Facebook post being referenced, the district employee said, "I was informed that the post has been taken down."