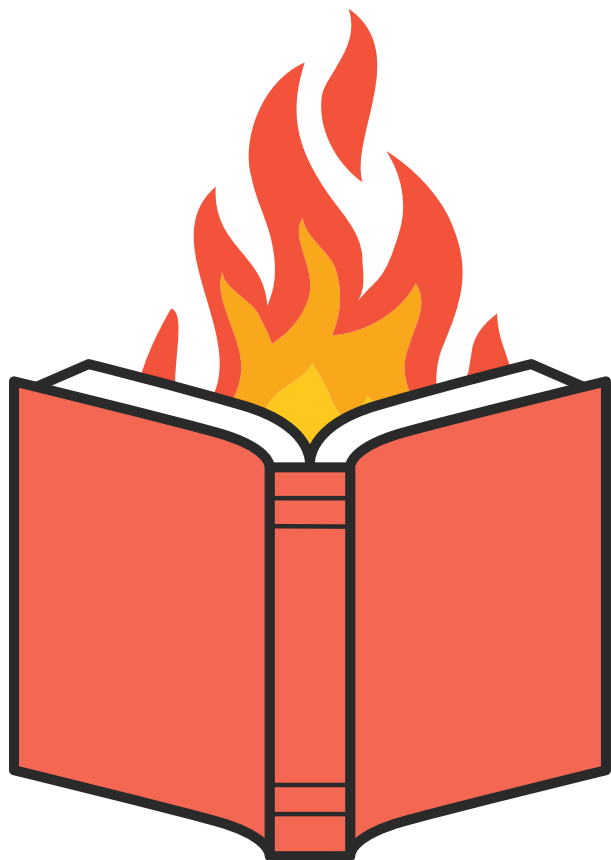




# OLD MATCHES, NEW FLAMES



MODERN BOOK BANS &  
THE QUESTION OF CENSORSHIP



CATHERINE O'DONNELL

# **Old Matches, New Flames**

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the Question of Censorship

**Catherine O'Donnell**

*To my sister, Elisabeth  
for showing me the way*

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# Introduction

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Book banning is a 21st century issue. Move aside your mental images of Nazis standing around giant bonfires, or the dystopian future of Fahrenheit 451. Though it may seem like a thing of the past or fictional future, book bans are happening right now – to your local libraries, schools, and maybe your favorite books.

Since 2020, controversy over library books and school curriculums has been on the rise. Content regarding sexuality, BI-POC experiences, and LGBTQ identities are being restricted from schools and libraries across the country. This debate appeals to the deep political divide in America, fueling the fears of voters on both sides of the spectrum.

Generally, the push to restrict books comes from the politically conservative, who base their argument on the protection of children from “inappropriate” content. Books with any sexual material (typically LGBTQ themes) are being called pornographic. On the other side of the debate, people worry that the removal of diverse books will erase and devalue these identities. It is a manifestation of the raging culture war. Those with conservative and traditional values are clashing with liberal progressives. Depending

on the kind of content permitted, the books kids are reading will either reflect one version of American society or another.<sup>1</sup>

We are living in the age of outrage. The hyper-polarization of American politics has resulted in debate over just about anything. My sisters and I have a running joke about a 2018 Fox News story that sparked fury over a gingerbread cookie. On national television, news anchor Tucker Carlson went on an angry rant about a cookie being labelled a “gingerbread person,” claiming it was liberals pushing their agenda of nonbinary acceptance. My sisters still laugh about the ridiculousness of an impassioned argument for the gender status of a cookie.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst a constant flow of political fury, it can be hard to tell what to take seriously. When I first heard about efforts to ban books across the United States, it sounded like the typical hyper-fixated rage driven by political divides. It seemed like a sensational news story, stirring up concerns on both sides of the culture war. People would move on to the next thing once book bans proved to be a pointless effort. They had to be pointless, I thought. With so many other valuable things to focus on, are library books really what matters?

But book bans caught on in a way I never expected. News stories and social media posts about the controversy became inescapable. The use of the word censorship promptly sounded alarms. In a country built on freedom of speech, censorship threatens our very identity.

Not only were library books being challenged and removed, actual legislation started taking shape. In 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Parental Rights in Education, or “Don’t Say Gay” bill into law. Teachers were no longer allowed to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. The law required the removal of all books regarding LGBTQ themes. Picture books like *Tango Makes Three*, the story of two male zoo penguins starting a family, were removed from schools. A penguin love story being deemed inappropriate for children is simply outrageous. It was unfathomable that America was permitting such a blatant attack on the LGBTQ community.<sup>3</sup>

The “Don’t Say Gay” law sent shockwaves throughout the

country and sparked the introduction of similar restrictive legislation in other states. The laws primarily restrict LGBTQ content and critical race theory in school curriculums and libraries.

These developments make it feel like America is moving backwards in history. The lack of acceptance for LGBTQ identities and efforts to rewrite Black history reflect outdated perspectives. Hate for marginalized groups is not new, but its increasing dominance is cause for concern. Book bans set the tone for the way these groups are treated outside of the library. It sends the message that diverse identities do not have a place in our culture.

Michael Colford, the director of library services at Boston Public Library, is passionate about providing books that represent all identities. As a gay man, he recalls the value of representative library books as a kid.

“When I grew up in the ‘70s, I learned a lot about things I needed to know by going to the library and reading books. I was looking for information that certainly wasn’t coming to me from popular culture or even my parents,” Colford said.

“I think it’s important for people of different races to be able to see themselves in literature and in popular materials so they can read about something they relate to. I also think very strongly that reading about people who are different than you creates empathy.”<sup>4</sup>

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Amanda Jones is one of the most prominent librarians on the front lines of the fight for library books. In 2024, she released *That Librarian*, a book about her experience trying to defend challenged books in her library in Lafayette, Louisiana. Members of the community ran an online smear campaign against her, claiming that she was grooming children in the library with pornographic books.

Until I learned Jones’s story, my understanding of the issue was pretty cut and dry. Typical news coverage of book banning portrays it as a crisis of censorship, with the major concern being children’s lack of book access. Though this is an important aspect, it is certainly not the only impact of the controversy.

Jones's story presented a new angle that inspired me to explore book bans on a deeper level. I began to wonder about the quiet impacts. Nobody was talking about the librarians and teachers who were dealing with this both personally and professionally. Not only are librarians being disparaged in their communities, they are losing their jobs. I knew there must be countless other librarians like Jones, whose stories paint a meaningful picture of the fight for the right to read.

Conversations with librarians, teachers, and authors have illuminated the ways book bans are harming communities and libraries themselves.

In this search beyond the black-and-white of the story, I also set out to explore the quiet, unrecognized intentions of book bans. On the surface, groups are pushing for the removal of library books because they are "obscene" or "erotic."

In *That Librarian*, Jones argues, "It is about marginalizing and erasing cultures and groups of people, it is about defunding public institutions, it is about dumbing down society for a more easily led population, and it is about using libraries for political gain."<sup>5</sup> Are the motivations really this sinister?

Though I am critical of those banning books, my exploration of their motivations requires an open mind. I do not want to dismiss one side as fascist book burners no more than I want to call the other side groomers.

Still, the way book bans are leveraged in political spheres must be examined. Politicians have used this issue as a pillar of their campaigns. Voters on both sides are mobilized by their concerns surrounding books and education. Huda Shaltry, legislative chair of the Idaho Public Library Association, expressed concern over libraries becoming a political playground. "It is now a political statement to say you support public libraries," Shaltry said. "Never has that been a thing."<sup>6</sup>

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At the end of the day, one must wonder what this fight is for. Though libraries are a valued institution, their place in modern society remains an unanswered question. Young people are not

reading as much as they used to, and public libraries across America have been struggling for years. Since 2010, in-person library visits have dropped over 25%.<sup>7</sup> In their fight for books, librarians also fight for relevance in the modern world.

Libraries are a representation of democracy. Free and open access to material makes public libraries a true equalizer. Regardless of background or socioeconomic status, everyone is welcome to educate themselves and access information. As book bans deplete library resources and erode public trust, Americans must consider the inevitable impact on our democracy.

“We have to think about what the cornerstones of our community are. Where’s the foundation of everything else?” said Lynette Mejía, the executive director of Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship.

“I think libraries are one of those things, so they’re worth protecting and worth fighting for.”<sup>8</sup>

# The Truth Among the Noise

People either think that book bans are a crisis, threatening First Amendment rights and American education as a whole, or not happening at all. Both of these perspectives can not be true. So, what's really going on?

Misconceptions about book bans are driven by mixed messages and echo chambers. News coverage and social media content can tell completely different stories. Like so many modern issues, people end up on either side of the debate depending on the media they consume.

In January 2025, after Donald Trump took office, the Department of Education made a press release announcing that it would end “Biden’s book ban hoax.” Meanwhile, most major news organizations are covering book controversies and referring to them as bans. These mixed messages contribute to the ongoing debate, entrenching each side further into their own camp. One must escape their own biases to understand the actual story.<sup>1</sup>

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With such a politicized issue, the sway of a news source

plays a role in its book banning coverage. Conservative leaning news outlets typically frame book bans as a hoax, and publish stories that discredit their impact. Language is a huge factor here.

On Fox News, the words “regulation” and “relocation” are frequently used in place of “ban.”<sup>2</sup> Liberal leaning and neutral news outlets frame book challenges as censorship issues, freely using the words “ban” and “censorship.”<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times*, NPR, and ABC News are in this category. On these outlets, challenged books with themes of race or LGBTQ characters tend to be described as “inclusive.” This frames the books positively, as opposed to the “woke” description from more right-leaning sources (which has a negative connotation in modern media.)<sup>4</sup> Additionally, left-leaning to neutral platforms are more likely to highlight efforts against book bans (lawsuits, protesting librarians, etc.)

These opposing media frames were on display in 2023, when Amanda Gorman’s book, *The Hill We Climb* was the focus of controversy in a Florida school library. The book contains Gordon’s famous poem of the same title, which calls for racial equality and American unity. One parent complained about the book, which led to it being moved from the elementary school section to the middle school section. Headlines from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and NPR announced that Gorman’s poem was being targeted by book bans. On Fox News and *USA Today*, this issue was classified as “relocation” rather than a ban.<sup>5</sup>

The differing news narratives trickle down to social media, where people are siloed into echo chambers by algorithms. The perspectives they engage with become the only ones they see.<sup>6</sup> Michael Colford, the director of library services at Boston Public Library, attested to social media throwing a wrench in the controversy.

“That’s the way a lot of this information and misinformation gets spread. Sometimes it’s under the guise of the press,” Colford said. “But it isn’t like before the internet, when everything was the press, and then the only other way you could get the word out is through a newsletter or by talking to people. Now you can just slap something on social media, and it can get picked up, it can go all over the place.”<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the narrative being pushed, most media coverage incites fear among readers and villainizes the opposing side. The promotion of fear and negative emotions is proven to draw attention and readership. As media coverage has increased over the years, so has the frenzy of fear and anger from both sides.<sup>8</sup>

## Defining Bans

It is important to clarify what people mean by “book ban.” In most mainstream media, any restriction of book access is referred to as a ban. This covers anything from the removal of a book from a library, or moving a book to a restricted section.

Some believe this is the incorrect use of the word ban. The removal of a library book does not stop people from finding it elsewhere, like a bookstore or another library. Often, books are moved from the children’s section to the adult section of a library, prompting “relocation” to replace the word ban. In these cases, when books are not being totally outlawed or physically burned, people think that word ban does not apply.

Eugene Volokh is a First Amendment law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. According to Volokh, book removals and restrictions do not qualify as bans. He employs the more strict definition.

“The normal English sense of ban would mean it’s illegal to have a particular book, or it’s illegal to sell a particular book. This would be highly unlikely under First Amendment scrutiny,” Volokh said.

Ultimately, Volokh defines these events as decisions by libraries about whether to provide a book.

“People have increasingly used the term book ban to mean something that’s not really a book ban, but an exclusion of the book from libraries.” Volokh said. “What it really is is a decision by the owner of the library, the library board, or maybe the legislature not to allow the book.”<sup>9</sup>

Push for the “ban” label comes from those protecting access to books. Ellen Hopkins is one of the most banned authors of the 21st century. She fights for access to her own books and others.

“They give you this, ‘books aren't actually banned.’ Well, most kids can't afford to buy books, right? If a kid can't find the book they need on a library shelf, that book is effectively banned to that kid,” Hopkins said. “This is book banning. It's not just, ‘you can buy them, you can find somewhere,’ you know. That's just an excuse.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other side of the issue, those supporting the removal of certain themes from libraries find the “ban” label to be an over-dramatization of reality.

“No one's banning any books,” said Tiffany Justice, the co-founder of Moms for Liberty. This conservative organization is a main player in the push to remove LGBTQ content from schools. They base their platform on parental rights in education.

“Write the book, print the book, publish the book, sell the book. Put the book in the public library, if your community wants to pay for it.” Justice said that the term “book banning” is nothing but a nonsensical political tactic from the Democratic party.<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to get wrapped up in definitions, but whether or not book restrictions are technically bans distracts from the actual issue at hand.

PEN America is a non-profit organization that aims to protect freedom of speech and expression. They are one of the leading organizations tracking book bans and fighting for the rights of librarians. According to the PEN America website, a book ban is:

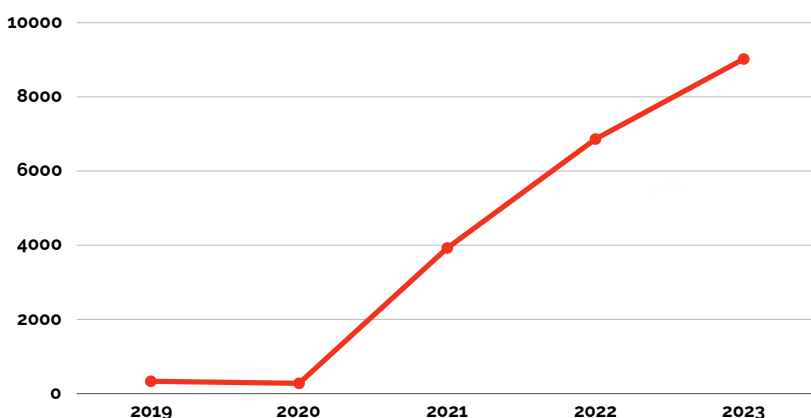
“Any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished, either temporarily or permanently.”<sup>12</sup>

In this book, I will be aligning with this definition, and referring to any book restriction as a book ban.

## Who, What & Where

Understanding the reality of book bans comes down to statistics. Organizations like PEN America and the American Library Association track book bans annually, providing a gauge of the banning crisis.

Challenged Book Titles (2019-2023)



1

Book controversies have always been present in schools and libraries, but they only recently became a modern phenomenon. In 2019, there were 332 book titles challenged across America. In 2020, 3,926 titles were challenged. In 2023, this number jumped to 9,021 titles. In just two years, the amount of controversial titles increased by over 2,000%, reaching the highest levels in recent history. Clearly, something changed to invoke this wave of challenges.<sup>13</sup>

The sudden spike in 2020 aligned with the surging Black Lives Matter movement, which fanned the flames of an ongoing culture war. Activism on both sides of the political spectrum became more prevalent, with people fighting against discriminatory police brutality or supporting police (i.e. the Blue Lives Matter

countermovement). It was a period of cultural unrest, forcing Americans to face the question of what our country represents.<sup>14</sup>

Examining education is the natural response to such a question. American identity is wrapped up in our books and school curriculums. Books have always been a reflection of American culture and experience. When people do not like what is represented, they feel American identity is threatened.<sup>15</sup> Concepts at the heart of the culture war (gender, sexual identity, and racial history) were put under the spotlight.

## **Book Challenges**

A book challenge is an official effort to remove a book from a library. It is essentially a formal complaint made by someone in the community (a library patron, a parent, etc.). Although challenges are not actual bans, they reflect controversy surrounding books and conversations regarding what is appropriate. Most libraries have guidelines in place for people to make book challenges, and mandated steps regarding the library's response. Libraries typically have some kind of form to submit a challenge through their website. Rebecca Sofferman, the librarian at Colchester Middle School in Colchester Vermont, explained the typical challenge process.

First, the challenger can speak with the librarian. Sofferman said that there are sometimes good reasons to remove a book. There is a chance a book is outdated and should be reconsidered. If the librarian decides to defend the book, the challenge process begins. The challenger is technically required to read the entire book, although Sofferman said this is rarely the case. Often, people take issue with a single excerpt of the book and ignore the rest. A committee is formed, often with teachers, librarians, people from the community, and students selected as members. The committee reads the book as well. The book stays on shelf during this long process.

When the committee makes their decision about the book, they alert the school board and superintendent. Ultimately, the decision is up to them.<sup>16</sup>

This is not the exact protocol within every library, but the

basic steps tend to be the same. Most libraries and schools try to handle these situations with care. However, putting resources into challenge procedures is taxing.

## **The Financial Burden**

The time and work it takes to evaluate a book challenge ends up costing libraries and school districts considerable amounts of money. Libraries and schools may not have the funding to allocate resources toward book controversies. In these cases, librarians might remove a book without going through the challenge process.<sup>17</sup>

Legislation can also put a financial burden on libraries. For example, Florida passed House Bill 1069 in 2023, which required all schools to record every book in their collection. This was meant to ensure that all books comply with the regulations on sexual content. The task of digitally chronicling all materials was estimated to cost between \$34,000 and \$135,000 annually. This diverts funding away from beneficial and enriching school or library programs. The burden is not only on libraries themselves. In Texas, for example, book banning legislation cost taxpayers at least \$3.6 million in 2023.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Challengers**

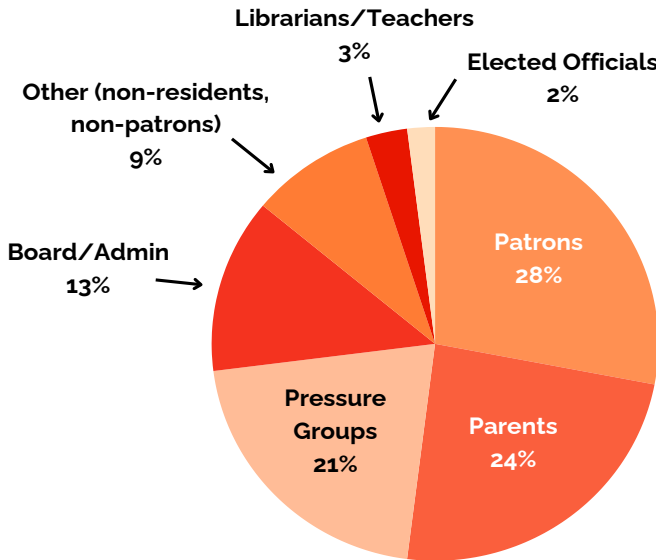
Efforts for book bans are spurred by a small number of people. Although book challenges make significant waves in communities, polling consistently finds that the vast majority of Americans are opposed to them. In a 2022 study, 91% of Americans believed that books should not be removed from a library when a community member takes issue with it. Only 16% believed that libraries keep inappropriate books on the shelves.<sup>18</sup>

Challenges typically come from library patrons, parents, or organized groups. The groups range from large political advocacy organizations to local Facebook groups. Moms for Liberty is one of the most prominent and well established organizations, with chapters in 48 states.

According to PEN America, the actions of organized

groups are the direct cause of at least 20% of book bans. They appear at school board meetings, submit challenges, and perpetuate anti-library rhetoric. Libraries and school boards have been folding under the pressure of these outspoken groups.<sup>19</sup>

### Groups Most Likely to Challenge Books



2

Although school libraries tend to be the center of the issue, the majority of book challenges take place in public libraries. Most challenges are overturned by the school boards or politicians who review them, but challenges are often the way books end up banned. With rising numbers of challenges, the likelihood of book bans increases.<sup>20, 21</sup>

Along with challenges, incidents of actual bans are on the rise. In the 2023-2024 school year, 10,046 books were removed from American school libraries. This number tripled from the previous school year. These bans included 4,231 different titles.<sup>22</sup>

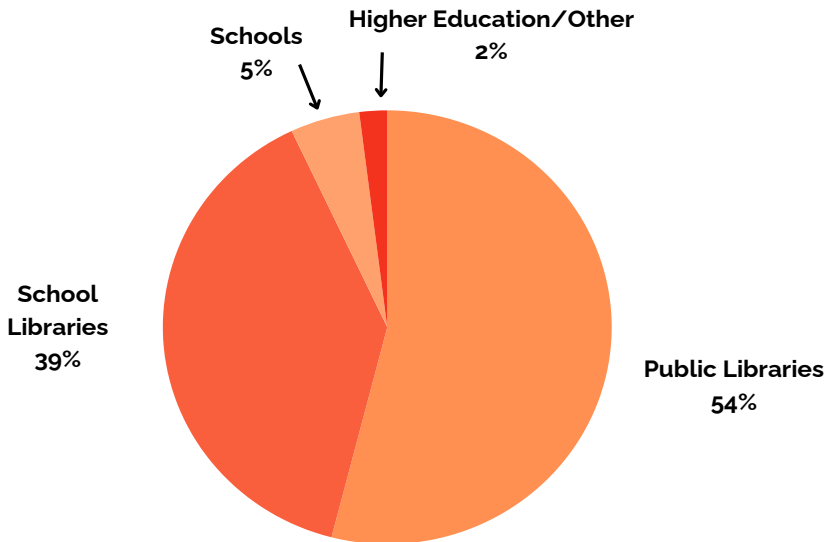
Bans are not always the result of formal challenges. Com-

munity members often informally complain about the book to a librarian or library board, prompting its removal without the challenge process.

Michael Lunsford is the executive director of Citizens for a New Louisiana, a nonprofit conservative organization based in Lafayette, Louisiana. One of their main focuses is removing library books they deem inappropriate or “erotic.” Lunsford encourages members to bypass the formal challenge process, and instead complain about books publicly. He finds this more efficient.

“Why are we submitting a challenge to a book? Why don't I just tell people what we found? Doing that, in my experience, has had a much greater impact than showing up at a library board control meeting and reading from a book or filing an official challenge,” Lunsford said.

### Where Book Challenges Take Place



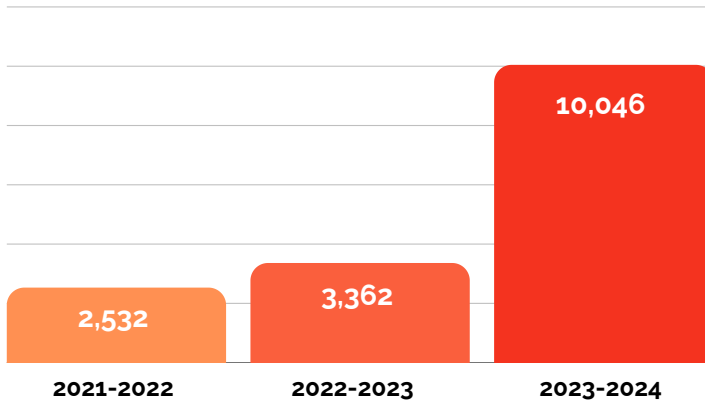
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Lunsford insists that even librarians prefer to avoid formal challenges. “If you file a challenge, there's a whole process that

has to unfold. Whereas, if the library system itself identifies these books, they are free to curate the book however they like. So when we bring attention to a book, generally, the book disappears. That's a win for everybody."<sup>23</sup>

Although librarians sometimes comply with the demands of the challengers, this does not necessarily mean they want to remove the book. The risks to the library (and their own careers) are likely a driving force behind their decisions.

Instances of Book Bans (by school year)



4

Of course, legislation is behind a significant amount of book restrictions. A 2022 PEN America report found 41% of book bans were tied to state officials or lawmakers. The 2023 report found 74% of bans came from organized political efforts (advocacy groups, elected officials or legislation).<sup>24</sup>

In 2021, Texas representative Matt Kruase compiled a list of 850 books he wanted removed from schools. Most of the books covered topics of sexuality or racial history. He sent the list to school districts throughout the state asking that they remove the books, which was ultimately an overreach of his political pow-

er. Still, this list drummed up concern within school districts and encouraged challenges of the mentioned books. In this way, politicians hold significant power.<sup>25</sup>

States with the most book bans are the ones that lead in restrictive legislation. Texas and Florida are consistent leaders. The laws range in requirements. In Utah, a law states that books containing any sexual content must be removed from schools and school libraries. In South Carolina, all schools must record the books in their collections, making them public for people to file complaints. Whether the goal is increased parental rights or library transparency, the common thread is outlawing “obscene” or “inappropriate” material. These laws lay the groundwork for the mass removal of books.<sup>26</sup>

## The Hot Spots

Book bans are happening across the United States, but Texas and Florida are the clear epicenters. Since 2020, these two Southern states have led book challenges and bans by a significant margin. This past school year, Iowa surpassed Texas after it introduced new restrictive legislation. Senate Bill 496 passed in 2024, and takes after Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law. It required the removal of books with any LGBTQ references in grades K-6. Books with any mention of sex were removed from all public schools. High numbers in Florida were largely due to House Bill 1069, which passed in 2023. Any book challenged for sexual content was removed during the review process.<sup>27</sup>

Book challenges and bans are undoubtedly more prevalent in states with more Republican voters and politicians. In “red states” like Texas and Florida, conservative values are dominant. The 2024 study “Politics and Children’s Books: Evidence from School Library Collections” examines the relation between a county’s local politics and likelihood to ban books.

Researcher Kristen Slungaard Mumma studied 6,631 public school libraries across America. She found that schools subject to book challenges were more likely to be located in “areas covered by conservative groups.” 56% of schools experiencing book

challenges were in a county with a local chapter of a conservative group that calls for book bans. Groups that challenge these books are frequently aligned with conservative values and the Republican party.<sup>28, 29</sup>

### Most Bans in 2023-2024 School Year

	<b>State</b>	<b>Book Banning Incidents</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Florida</b>	4,561
<b>2</b>	<b>Iowa</b>	3,671
<b>3</b>	<b>Texas</b>	538
<b>4</b>	<b>Wisconsin</b>	438
<b>5</b>	<b>Virginia</b>	121

Republican political figures emphasize concerns around challenged books, generating fear of American “wokeness” and a liberal leaning education. In Florida, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has based much of his platform on changing educational narratives. In 2022, he signed the “Stop WOKE Act,” which would prevent any school or workplace discussions of racial discrimination. DeSantis built fear among conservatives by labelling these teachings as “indoctrination.” Although the law was blocked, it

contributed to the movement for restrictions in educational spaces.<sup>30, 31</sup>

Donald Trump winning the 2024 presidential election will bolster Republican voices like DeSantis's, as well as the effort for LGBTQ themes to be banned from schools and libraries. Trump has disparaged the transgender community throughout his campaign, and has consistently pushed the "anti-woke" narrative.

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Slungaard Mumma also concluded that high school libraries in counties with conservative leaning local politics provide approximately 45% fewer books with LGBTQ themes, and 50% fewer books that deal with race or racism. The study defined conservative counties as those in which the majority of the population voted for Donald Trump in 2020. With this deficit, Slungaard Mumma argues that schools experiencing book bans do not experience a major decrease in provided LGBTQ content because the numbers were already low.

Still, most libraries contained at least a few titles from Slungaard Mumma's list of controversial books. This supports the notion that libraries are still providing access to materials that even local decision makers object to.<sup>32</sup>

## **What's Being Banned**

The fact that books with LGBTQ themes and authors are disproportionately banned is widely undisputed. As of 2024, 19% of banned authors identify as LGBTQ, and 39% of authors are BIPOC.<sup>33</sup>

The categories of banned content typically overlap. The majority of banned content is related to sex, which can also be stories with LGBTQ or BIPOC characters. Much of the narrative surrounding sexual content is that it is pornographic and obscene. The value of these books, as art, education, or representation, is disregarded.

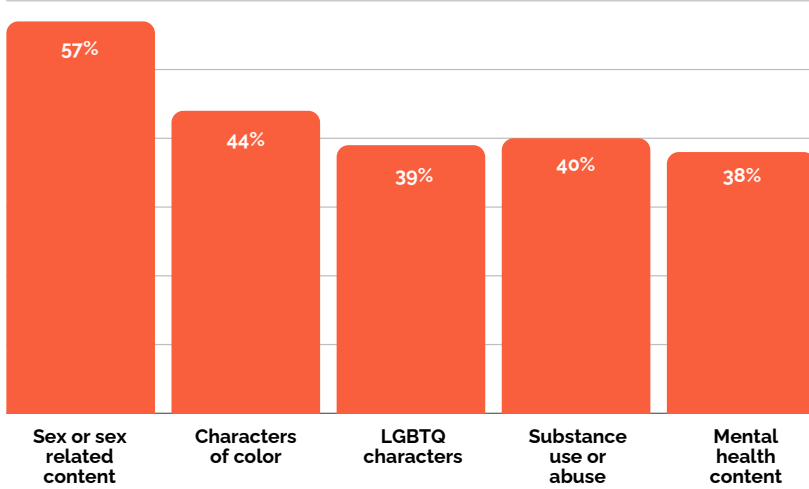
In some cases, LGBTQ themes and topics of racial discrimination are outright banned by law. Other times, these topics are removed under the guise of other accusations.

### Most Banned Titles of the 2023-2024 School Year

	Book + Author	Bans	Typical Reason for Ban	Overview
<b>1</b>	Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult	98	Rape scene	A school shooting from the perspective of the teenage shooter
<b>2</b>	Looking for Alaska by John Green	97	Claims of sexually explicit content	A love story between two teenagers, exploring grief, loss, and mental health
<b>3</b>	The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky	85	Sexual abuse depictions, LGBTQ content	A coming of age story about a struggling high school student
<b>4</b>	Sold by Patricia McCormick	85	Claims of sexually explicit content	A girl is sold into sexual slavery in India makes a journey to freedom
<b>5</b>	Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher	76	Depiction of suicide	The story and aftermath of a high school girl's suicide

	<b>Book + Author</b>	<b>Bans</b>	<b>Typical Reason for Ban</b>	<b>Overview</b>
<b>6</b>	Crank by Ellen Hopkins	76	Claims of sexually explicit content, depiction of drug use	A high school student becomes addicted to hard drugs
<b>7</b>	Identical by Ellen Hopkins	74	Depictions of sexual abuse	Twin sisters seek help in dealing with their abusive father
<b>8</b>	The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini	73	Depictions of sexual violence	The life story of an Afghan boy during violent political uprisings in Afghanistan
<b>9</b>	The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood	67	Profanity, claims of being anti-Christian	A dystopian future of a patriarchal society in which women are forced to bear children
<b>10</b>	Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen	66	Claims of sexually explicit content	In the struggle of the Great Depression, a young man joins the circus
<b>11</b>	Tricks by Ellen Hopkins	66	Claims of sexually explicit content, depiction of drug use	Five troubled teenagers enter a life of prostitution

## Content of Banned or Challenged Titles



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*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison has consistently been a top banned book in the 21st century. Published in 1970, the book tells the story of a young Black girl living in an abusive household. It explores the harmful impact of white beauty standards on young Black people. The book is a powerful lesson, and provides representation for Black experiences.

Bans of *The Bluest Eye* hinge their argument on the sexual abuse scenes being too explicit. In this way, the context and value of the book are overlooked.<sup>34</sup>

*Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult was the most banned book of the 2023-2024 school year. The story follows different characters' experiences on the day of a school shooting. It was originally published in 2007. Since its release, school shootings have become more common than ever. Most challengers of the book leverage a single page that references rape. Although the story is a valuable portrayal of American gun violence, it is being discarded as “obscene.”<sup>35</sup>

With titles being removed for cherry-picked, out of context content, it seems that the perceived obscenities are not the true reason for their removal. The other themes, like race, violence, and gender identity, may be the true driver of the bans.

## The Chilling Effect

The effect of book bans extends further than the removed books that are recorded. In a tense time, librarians tend to engage in self-censorship when selecting books for their collections.

In her 2024 study, Slungaard Mumma found that districts that experienced book bans were less likely to add LGBTQ books by the following fall.

“It’s suggestive of this chilling effect. It’s not because those books are banned, it’s because the librarians didn’t buy them. So that’s the spillover effect of challenging material, which I think is much more relevant for people who are specifically concerned about the access to certain kinds of content,” Slungaard Mumma said.

Sungaard Mumma believes that librarians are feeling constrained in their ability to make decisions about what is appropriate. In some places, librarians are specifically being guided away from certain content.<sup>36</sup>

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Legislation perpetuates the chilling effect as well. Laws have punishments in place for librarians and teachers who provide restricted materials. Librarians can be fined or fired, and teachers could lose their teaching license. With so much on the line, educators are influenced to stay far away from risky books. This is a quiet, unquantifiable impact of book banning that must be accounted for.

Huda Shaltry has witnessed the chilling effect as a result of vaguely worded state legislation. Idaho House Bill 710 was passed in July 2024. It states that community members can get any book removed if they prove it is “harmful.”

“In that code, it literally says any act of homosexuality is

harmful. And when asked, like, ‘so what does that mean?’ Is it two people of the same sex, holding hands, is that an act of homosexuality? [Legislators] are like, ‘it could be.’ And so they were purposely vague with everything,” Shaltry said.

In Idaho, when a library receives a request for reconsideration, they have 30 days to respond. If they choose to keep the book, they are open to litigation. The law states that the library can be sued for a minimum of \$250 if they refuse to remove or relocate a book.

Because the law can be interpreted so openly, Shaltry said that librarians are avoiding books with any potential for controversy. Librarians want to protect their libraries and themselves.<sup>37</sup>

## 2

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# Voices

The impacts of book banning are deeper than the loss of book access. The controversy within school and library communities has been dominating the lives of the people involved. Educators are caught in the crossfire, being villainized for doing the jobs they were trained to do.

In a 2023 poll of classroom teachers and librarians, 65% said that conversations regarding book bans are negatively impacting their ability to teach. With books and curriculums under the microscope, educators feel constrained by the societal pressure on what they choose to provide.

71% said that their expertise as educators is being undermined by the issue. As the controversy rages on, trust in librarians and teachers is being weakened. Polling finds that public trust in grade school teachers has been consistently declining since 2020. Interestingly, trust in public education differs depending on political views. In 2023, only 44% of Republicans reported that they trust teachers to do a good job. Trust was much higher among Democrats, reaching 70% of respondents. The war on education is clearly politicized.<sup>1</sup>

Librarians, once valued and appreciated community figures, are being labelled as groomers, pedophiles, and even the “arm of Satan.” Through public forums, social media posts and lawn signs, librarians across the country are under personal attack.<sup>2</sup>

In 2023, 27% of librarians reported that violent incidents in the library have increased significantly since 2021. This includes verbal assault from library patrons and community members.<sup>3</sup>

Librarians are even losing their jobs. In 2021, Brooky Parks, a librarian Colorado, was fired for permitting library programs regarding anti-racism and LGBTQ support. Suzette Baker, a Texas librarian, was fired in 2022 for refusing to remove books from her library. Community members had claimed that the books were pornographic. When she did not remove them, the library board stated that she was allowing her personal opinion to interfere with her job.

Parks and Baker claimed workplace discrimination with the U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission. Both cases were settled in favor of the librarians. Still, policies that bar diverse and inclusive themes from their libraries remain in place. Laws that allow for their termination also remain.<sup>4</sup>

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The stress of book controversies is taking a significant emotional toll on librarians and teachers. A 2024 study found that mental health among library and school workers has been declining in recent years. The increased controversies in these spaces is cited as a cause for this decline.<sup>5</sup>

Banned authors are also dealing with the emotional toll of bans. In many cases, their stories and experiences are reflected in their books. For example, *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe was the most banned book of 2021. It is a graphic memoir about Kobabe’s experience as a nonbinary teenager. It was banned due to claims of sexually explicit content and pornographic images. When these kinds of stories are banned, it sends the message to the author that their life experience and identity is unacceptable. This can be threatening and triggering specifically for the LGBTQ community.<sup>6</sup>

From a professional standpoint, having books banned can

be damaging to an author's career. Sometimes, banned books spike in sales because of the media hype, but this is not always the case. Bans can take a serious toll on the circulation of a book. Additionally, when authors are controversial, they stop being invited to school events and book talks, which can be a large part of professional visibility for young adult or children's authors.

Similarly to the chilling effect among librarians, banned authors may censor themselves. Instead of being emboldened by bans, they may feel pressured into altering their stories and styles.<sup>7</sup>

Mainstream media coverage of book banning lacks the voices of those dealing with the personal effects. Instead of listening to politicians, we should be listening to those with boots on the ground, witnessing the various impacts first hand.

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I have selected five voices to help illustrate the quiet impacts of book bans. These stories, from librarians, teachers, and a banned author, shine light on a variety of experiences. Each of them have been personally and professionally affected by the controversy. In their fight for the freedom to read, they are also fighting for autonomy in their professions. It is crucial to learn their stories and understand the everyday reality of book bans. Although these are only five voices, there are countless others with stories just like theirs.

## **Beth Cuddy**

Beth Cuddy has had a long career in libraries. She began working as an elementary school librarian in 2008 in Auburn, New York. She became the Auburn High School librarian in 2021. That same year, she experienced her first book challenge.

"It was at a school board meeting where a community member saw that the book *All Boys Aren't Blue* was on display. They pulled it, went over to one of the administrators and said 'I have a problem with this book,'" Cuddy said.



*Photo courtesy of Beth Cuddy*

Beth Cuddy in the library at Auburn High School.

Cuddy was not at the school board meeting, so she found out about this incident the next morning at school. The principal came to the library and explained the situation. Cuddy's first question was what happened to the book. The community member that noticed it had taken it home to read.

"I said, 'Well, this makes me really uncomfortable, because that's not how the process works. You don't just remove the book... If this is how we're going to be doing things, it's just a slippery slope. I could make a case against the Holy Bible as being something that's full of violence and incest and all of that. And I mean, is this what we're going to do?'"

"I felt that although there was a board policy in place, it was just going to be circumvented to appease these community members," Cuddy said.

*All Boys Aren't Blue*, by George M. Johnson, was published

in 2020. It is Johnson's memoir, chronicling their experience being young, Black and nonbinary growing up in New Jersey. It is a coming of age story that explores the Black and LGBTQ experience, and the complicated intersection of these identities. It is a *New York Times* bestseller and won numerous awards upon release. Johnson was praised for their honesty in telling their story, shining light on the queer Black experience.

*All Boys Aren't Blue* was the second most banned book of the 2021-2022 school year (behind Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*). It was either banned for discussions of gender identity and LGBTQ themes (conflicting with the "Don't Say Gay" category of laws), or for containing sexually explicit content. There are two descriptions of sex in the book, one of which being an assault.<sup>8</sup>

Cuddy explained the challenger's argument. "She said, 'This is a book on homosexuality. You could open the book into various places within and it was just pornography, nothing more... What possible educational value can be derived from these books? Are we supporting our LGBTQ children or are we promoting it?'"

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The summer before the book challenge in Auburn High School, there was a different school controversy. Community members started a petition to rename the school "Harriet Tubman High School." Harriet Tubman, the American abolitionist, lived in Auburn for the entire second half of her life.

People were expressing outrage about the name change in school board meetings. Cuddy believes this issue revealed racism within their city.

"They were sort of cloaking it in the sense that, you know, 'There's a tradition here, I went to Auburn High School.' I think what you're witnessing is just sort of blatant racism. Being that resistant to naming the high school after a really significant historical figure who made our community her hometown."

There was a big group of parents complaining about the potential renaming of the school. When the renaming fell through, this group shifted their attention to library books.

“This whole thing was very different from what we were taught in library school.” Cuddy said. In terms of book challenges, she was prepared for parents to potentially dislike a book their child brings home. These situations were usually resolved by having a conversation with the parent. If they really did not want their child to have the book, then Cuddy was okay abiding by their wishes. By these standards, the *All Boys Aren't Blue* challenge was highly irregular.

“This was a book that had never been checked out. It was on a list of books to look for; A lot of right wing sites had lists of books for people to look for to challenge without even having read them. It was an inorganic book challenge. It wasn't based on someone's real belief that, ‘Oh, I don't want my child reading this.’ It was, ‘Oh, I know that this is a book that's on a list, and I need to speak out against it,’” Cuddy said.

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The Auburn High School school board president was adamant about following proper challenge policy. A committee was formed in order to determine whether or not the book met collection policy standards. Strangely, the superintendent put the main book challenger on the reconsideration committee.

“She used that as a way to denigrate me, accuse me of having no ethics, and basically just attack me personally,” Cuddy said. Cuddy found this unfair because she had only been the librarian for a few months. She had only purchased 70 books at that point, and *All Boys Aren't Blue* was there when she arrived.

“It was weird to be labeled as public enemy number one when I had done none of the things she was accusing me of. It was a very, very, very personal attack. It really felt like she thought that I had joined this profession just to ruin children, to expose them to the most disgusting material that I could find, and that I relished doing that.

“And then she took it even further by posting on Facebook all these videos where she would attack me. She never named me specifically, but I am the only high school librarian. So when you say the high school librarian, it's pretty obvious to pick out who

that person is,” Cuddy said.

By taking to social media, the main challenger garnered community attention. She went through Cuddy’s professional records and read them in online videos, claiming that Cuddy had been removing conservative books and replacing them with liberal books.

This was taken out of context. Cuddy had weeded the library within her first few months at the high school. Weeding is a process all librarians go through periodically, in which they remove books that are no longer needed (damaged, extremely outdated and no longer checked out, etc.) Weeding is necessary in order to keep collections updated.<sup>9</sup>

Cuddy had weeded out a book from the 1940s about the Constitution, because they have newer books on the same topic. This is what the main challenger claimed as the removal of conservative books.

“And then the vitriol that would appear in the comments underneath these videos of like, ‘How disgusting. How can one person do this? How does she have the right to buy the books?’” Cuddy said.

One of the commenters was one of Cuddy’s former library coworkers. Cuddy reached out to them and explained that everything being circulated was false and overblown. The woman apologized and took down the comment.

“Social media is so good at riling people up and enraging them. When you actually have a face to face conversation with someone about what is really happening, it just cools down the temperature so significantly. I think we would all do a lot better if we just got offline and talked face to face with the people that we live with in this community,” Cuddy said.

The group supporting the challenge and claiming that *All Boys Aren’t Blue* is pornographic was only about seven people, but they made waves in school board meetings. They photocopied excerpts of the book regarding sex and placed them around the library or brought them to board meetings. Taken out of context, the value of the text was lost.

Cuddy’s students became engaged in the controversy and

were motivated to read the book.

“I say this 100% confidently that this book would never have been checked out. I mean, getting students to read is very challenging at this high school. Brand new, wonderful stories never get checked out, and this would be one of them...But because of the attention, this suddenly became a hot commodity,” Cuddy said.

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After reading the book, the review committee went through the collection development guidelines. They ultimately concluded that the book was rightfully purchased and should be kept in the library. The only person to vote against the book was the original challenger. There has not been another challenge in Auburn High School ever since. Now, there is a form on the Auburn High School website that allows parents to name books they do not want their child to check out.

Cuddy thinks people may be losing interest in books, or realizing that book bans do not effectively censor these themes from high schoolers’ media intake.

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In 2022, Cuddy was named Librarian of the Year by the New York Library Association. In her acceptance speech, she said: “We are in a battle. A battle between the facts of the vulnerable versus the feelings of the powerful. I will continue to support students’ right to read as granted by the First Amendment and Constitution. Students need to see themselves in stories, and see that their stories matter.”<sup>10, 11</sup>

## **Anthony Crawford**

Anthony Crawford was destined to become a teacher. In college, he was originally a Business major with no intention of going into education. During his freshman year, after a summer working with kids, he became passionate about teaching. The connection he made with kids made him eager to educate and make

a difference in his community. Today, he teaches English at Millwood High School in Oklahoma City.



*Photo courtesy of Anthony Crawford*

In 2021, Crawford saw a social media post about a law being passed in Oklahoma. The law, House Bill 1775, banned schools from teaching “that one race is superior to another, that a person is inherently racist or oppressive, and that someone bears responsibility or should feel guilt for past actions of people of their same race or sex, among other provisions.” This put any discussion of Black history on the chopping block.<sup>12</sup>

Although the law would directly impact him, this was the first Crawford had heard of the bill. “I’m an English teacher, but you know, most of the lessons that we write about and talk about pertain to Black history. I was scared at

first, because I'm like, well this is almost my whole curriculum," Crawford said.

Crawford has always made a point to emphasize Black history and culture in his classroom. Growing up, he was frustrated that teachers never incorporated Black history into their lessons. That memory drives his passion today.

Upon learning about the new law, Crawford immediately reached out to the superintendent, breaking protocol and going straight to the top. The superintendent informed him that the school would be hiring an "instructional coach," someone to review all lesson plans and make sure they complied with the new restrictions. The school board was strict about any teachers conflicting with the law.

"They made it seem like they were supportive in the beginning. But then after a while, they started taking certain books off my lesson plans. After a while, they were saying that I can no longer write about certain topics...figures as far as like Malcolm X and Black Panthers.

"I had to send my lesson plans, I'm talking about every single lesson plan, to our instructional coach so they can overview it. Every time they reviewed mine, I had to take out certain lessons, I had to remove certain class assignments" Crawford said. Any books that contain Black history or explore the dynamics of racism in America were removed from Crawford's curriculum.

"We was reading *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* by Dr. Joy DeGruy. We was reading *PowerNomics* by Dr. Claud Anderson. They took down *The 50th Law* by Robert Green and *50 Cent*," Crawford said.

Millwood High School is a predominantly Black school (about 80%). In removing Black history and Black stories, the vast majority of students are losing representation.<sup>13</sup>

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In 2021, American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma filed a lawsuit challenging House Bill 1775. Crawford was selected to be a plaintiff in the case, along with several other teachers. ACLU representatives saw Crawford speak about the importance of Black

history in an interview and were moved by his passion. He agreed to be a plaintiff without hesitation.

“I had a lawyer who told me, if they fire you, then we could be able to sue the Department of Education out here in Oklahoma. After he told me that, I wasn’t fearful of losing my job or losing my teaching license,” Crawford said.

In the press, Crawford became the face of the fight for Black history in Oklahoma. He was featured in several news articles and social media posts.



*Photo courtesy of Anthony Crawford*

Anthony Crawford speaking outside the Oklahoma City federal courthouse with other ACLU representatives.

“To be honest, I was actually like – I want to say the token Black man but that’s so cliché – but I feel like the token Black man. They wanted to use my story, and use what I’ve experienced as a teacher when it comes to Black history as a way to push for the case. Which I didn’t have no problem with,” Crawford said.

The lawsuit is ongoing. In 2024, a federal court ruled in favor of the ACLU and made provisions to parts of House Bill 1775. However, the goal is for its removal altogether. The next step

from Crawford and the ACLU is to bring the matter to the Supreme Court. Even with the provisions to the law, Crawford is still being micromanaged in his lesson plans and course content. Currently, the only controversial book in his curriculum is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, a story from the Harlem Renaissance.

Crawford said that working with the ACLU and being on the forefront of the issue has been empowering. “I’m from the projects, so you know, I grew up learning these types of things and how the government works...I’ve kind of seen all this. So to kind of be a part of it is kind of fun.

“I was getting threats, and I’m like, ‘Oh, wow. This is actually what I be seeing in the movies, and it’s something I read about when it came to the Black Panthers.’ So I’m like, ‘Oh, this is kind of cool,’ you know.”

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Millwood High School students and teachers are generally very supportive of Crawford. Ryan Walters became the Oklahoma state superintendent in 2023. He was teaching AP History at Millwood High School when the bill passed, and his students discovered that he had signed off on it. Students were outraged and argued with Walters during class. The students’ passion for the topic makes them push Crawford to fight harder.

“They ask me all the time, ‘Why you holding back, why you holding back?’ And I’m like, I got two daughters at home. I gotta think about them. I got a family, you know, I gotta think about them. I don’t want to be on the street, so I gotta think about my livelihood. I gotta pay these bills. I gotta pay my mortgage. So it’s deeper than just me being a rebel and just being like, ‘No, I’ll still teach whatever I want to teach.’”

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Although Crawford’s students stand strongly with his fight, he feels that Oklahoma as a whole is split on the issue. Some parents take issue with what Crawford teaches, even Black parents. “They was just like, ‘Man, that stuff don’t matter, this is 2022.’

They was like, “You just gotta just get your education and just move on. That’s it. That’s the real change. You gotta get a part of this system, you gotta change the system from within.’ That was kind of shocking, coming to Millwood and actually having to deal with that,” Crawford said.

This response exposed the nuance of critical race theory and Black history. Some Black Americans argue that teaching about slavery and Black struggle only perpetuates a discriminatory national narrative.<sup>14</sup> This argument threw Crawford for a loop. He began to question the origins of Black history, and the perpetuation of certain narratives in academic spheres.

“I started really doing my research. I’m like, man, maybe they do need to take it out the schools. They gave us a false narrative of our history, to the point where it kind of conditioned our kids to look at themselves a certain way and to follow this script that they want us to play.

“We’ve been kind of lost and seeking our identity, and we’ve created a culture to identify ourselves with that’s very destructive. Why is it that we always start at slavery, like, who were we before that? Where were we before that?” Crawford said.

“It’s like, okay, I’m right here fighting to keep this in school. But what really is going on? Why is it that they really want to keep this out? Everybody looks at me crazy when I say these things...But that’s just how I feel.

“They don’t want to have these types of conversations, because they’re so conditioned and fixed on what they’ve been teaching us for decades,” Crawford said.

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Ultimately, Crawford thinks this fight is not as simple as teaching Black history. Instead, they need to reevaluate the Black history that is being taught. His doubts in existing Black history and critical race theory can conflict with the ACLU. When he spoke about it in an interview, the ACLU told him not to say things like that publicly.

“I was just like, ‘Whoa, okay, I’m honest when I do the

interviews because I don't know how *not* to say my truth and say how I truly feel.”

Crawford thinks that these tough questions and conversations are necessary for the future of Black history in schools.<sup>15</sup>

## Ellen Hopkins



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Ellen Hopkins is one of the most banned authors of the 21st century. She was the #1 most banned author of 2023, and her books are consistently in the top 10 banned books list. Hopkins is best known for her young adult novels, which typically cover topics of addiction, abuse, and mental health among teenagers. These evocative novels, like *Crank*, *Identical*, and *Tricks* are critically acclaimed bestsellers.

Hopkins became an author with the goal of writing children's picture books. It was not until *Crank*, her first novel released in 2004, that she found her purpose as a writer.

“*Crank* was inspired by my daughter's story of meth addiction. She was like the kid you never would have expected to go there. To watch her dreams dissolve because of a couple bad choices she made... To me, I knew I had to write for teens and to write that story. I wanted to show them just how quickly a bad choice or two could turn your life,” Hopkins said.

“She was a straight-A kid. She was going places. Her dream was computer animation, that’s where she was going. Instead, she spent 20 plus years in and out of addiction and relapse. You know, her dreams were gone. If I could change that, I wanted to do that, and that’s how Crank happened.”

Crank tells the story of a teenage girl becoming addicted to methamphetamine, and the emotional struggle that comes along with addiction.

Hopkins felt that kids would benefit from reading a story about addiction and connecting with a character. After watching her own daughter’s experience, she knew how important it was to get these types of stories out there.

“My whole goal with teens has always been trying to bring a broader perspective into view for them through people who they’re gonna care about. Instead of someone saying ‘you can’t do this’ or whatever, it’s the idea that you can look at a character and become invested in that character and start to care which direction that character is taking themselves. That’s like living the experience without having to live that experience,” Hopkins said.

Hopkins is certain that Crank has changed thousands of lives for the better. The book is over 20 years old, and she still receives emails and letters from people who were touched by the book. People say that the book saved them or a loved one from a path of drug abuse.

Fans send messages about other books as well. Identical, another young adult novel, is about teenage girls being abused by their father. “One of my readers [wrote], ‘I have to thank you for not shutting the door, because when you close the door, people assume nothing goes on behind that door.’ And she thanked me for that,” Hopkins said. “She said, ‘I thought I was the only one. I cried through the whole book. But it was okay, because I knew that somebody believed me, saw me, could help me through this place, and not the other end.’”

These kinds of powerful responses motivate Hopkins to continue writing about tough topics. Unfortunately, these are the topics that have raised flags among book banning groups and individuals.

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Before the current wave of book banning, Hopkins said that parents would sometimes be concerned about her books. After all, drugs, sex and abuse are not topics to be taken lightly. There was typically an open dialogue between the librarian or teacher and the parent. Even Hopkins would be included sometimes. The root of the discussion was concern for the child, which Hopkins would not take issue with.

Today, there is less understanding between parties. Hopkins finds that the people most outraged about her books have not even read them. The actual value of the content is not being considered, only taken out of context through pull quotes.

In the 2023-2024 school year, *Crank*, *Identical*, and *Tricks* were among the top 11 banned books in America. They were most often removed due to claims of sexually explicit content. People have claimed that these books are pornographic, which Hopkins firmly objects to.<sup>16</sup>

“Yes, there is sexual content in a book about teen prostitution, because there’s no way to actually write sex trafficking without having sex somewhere, at least referred to. But there is nothing in those things that any of those kids experience that is meant to turn anybody on. That’s not why that content is there. The content is there because I need to show you what it looks like.

“And I have to write honestly, because if I don’t write honestly, if I don’t explore those subjects factually, then not only will I be called on it, but that would be dismissing my role. I’m trying to keep kids off the streets of Las Vegas, or get a kid who’s being sexually abused to find help.” Like other authors, Hopkins has been personally attacked for her books, and called names like “the queen of pornography.”

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As a prominent banned author, Hopkins has come into more spotlight than ever before. She has been speaking out about the issue through interviews and work with the ACLA and PEN America. It seems as though the publicity of being a banned author

would boost one's career. However, Hopkins is still being negatively impacted professionally.

"There's this whole idea that when your book is banned, you know, everybody's gonna buy it, you're gonna make a bunch of money. Doesn't work that way. School libraries are a huge, huge part of the [young adult] authors market. School libraries buy them, teachers buy them for their classrooms. That stuff's gone now. My middle grade books have been removed from Florida schools because my name is on the cover," Hopkins said. Authors will not easily recover from being blacklisted from their key markets.

Hopkins does not feel a sense of pride over being a banned author. She is mainly frustrated and hurt.

"Everything about writing those books was about me trying to bring people more together, and so to have them do this instead, that's hurtful to me. I built a career doing this because I wanted to help people. We feel like it's not just our careers at stake, it's our belief system that's under attack. I mean, I feel like I'm a pretty good person. And to be under attack and called the things that I have been, it's devastating on some level. It really is," Hopkins said.

She has found that authors are not taken as seriously in their fight for books. When she has spoken at school boards, she is dismissed as a biased source trying to save her career.

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Moving forward, Hopkins is intent on staying true to her writing style and passions. She refuses to self censor, and will not adapt her stories to be more palatable. Even though her books are more susceptible to bans than ever, she will continue to publish. In 2024, she released *Sync*, a young adult novel about teenagers struggling in the foster care system.

"In writing that book, there were times when I was tempted to self censor, but there was no way I could write the book and not write it honestly. There's no way to write honestly about [foster care and juvenile detention] without having some kind of [controversial] content in that book. So to take it out preemptively would

have been like me fighting myself,” Hopkins said.

“And will the book sell as well? No, because school libraries aren’t buying it because my name is on the cover. I’m already behind as far as sales figures go and all that stuff. But that’s alright because the book is still out there. It’s powerful, it’s important, and the people that need to read it will find it one way or another, if I have to give it to them personally or whatever,” Hopkins said.

Hopkins advises other authors to avoid self censorship as well. Even if they cannot find a publisher, there are other ways to get their stories out. Her next book will be published on Substack, a media platform for creators. Her publisher chose not to release the book, so she is taking matters into her own hands.

“If you don’t write the stories that matter to you, no one’s going to want to read them anyway. You need to write the stories that matter to you, that mean something to you.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Huda Shaltry**

Huda Shaltry has worked in libraries for over a decade. In 2015, after realizing her passion for libraries, she got her masters in library science. Shaltry has been a librarian at Boise Public Library in Boise, Idaho since 2018. She never imagined that her job, which is based on a love for books and community, would become so politically charged.

As legislative chair of the Idaho Library Association, Shaltry is on the front lines of the fight for libraries. Before the current wave of book bans, this role was much simpler. The legislative chair would work with lobbyists and state representatives, dealing with federal funding issues for libraries.

“Never in a million years would I have thought that the political side of things would happen,” Shaltry said.

Shaltry became the legislative chair in 2021. In 2022, Idaho’s first book banning bill was introduced. House Bill 666 stated that any “harmful material” circulated by libraries would result in a \$1,000 fine or one year in jail for the librarian. The bill passed



*Photo courtesy of Huda Shaltry*

through the Idaho House of Representatives, but was ultimately shelved for being too vague and restrictive.

The same night the bill was shelved, the Idaho House of Representatives cut \$3.4 million out of the Idaho Commission for Libraries.

“There were other house representatives that were on our side that were like, ‘You are punishing library workers because you didn’t get your bill passed, and this is like a disgrace to all democracy,’” Shaltry said. The people making decisions about the library budget never contacted Shaltry or library representatives.

This incident was only the beginning of restrictive legislation being introduced. The next bill was House Bill 710, which essentially reworked the original bill. It stated that any parent or guardian can get a book removed if they prove it is harmful to their child. If the library did not remove it, they would be taken to court

and fined. The bill explicitly states that “any act of homosexuality” is considered harmful.<sup>18</sup>

Shaltry wondered if the rejection of House Bill 666 would make House Bill 710 easier to pass.

“We were worried that we made a bad bill better. A bill that has prison time is really easy to fight, but a bill that seems slightly reasonable is harder to explain to the general public,” Shaltry said. She did everything she could to fight against this restrictive legislation.

“I basically lived at the State House during the legislative session, and I would meet with a lot of the lawmakers all the time... meeting with them one-on-one, and explaining what the library actually does. Essentially, dispelling a lot of disinformation was a huge part of what I was doing,” Shaltry said.

“The ones that are the drivers of the bills did not want to hear anything we were saying.”

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One of Shaltry’s focuses in legislative conversations is keeping library decisions local. “I should not be telling a small town 1,000 miles away how to run their library, and neither should the state. They know their community best.”

She also advocates for a strong framework for book challenges. Not every library is equipped to deal with book challenges and controversy. When challenging a book, people are going straight to their state representatives before going to their librarians. This lack of communication is furthering polarization and false narratives.

Shaltry feels that book banning legislation does not accurately represent what the people of Idaho want. She feels that an imbalance in high political positions is the reason why laws are being passed. When House Bill 710 passed in 2024, people were writing and calling in to the governor. According to Shaltry, 7,500 people said they did not want the bill, while only 3,000 people said they approved it. In the library, Shaltry has found many more supporters than people coming to complain.

Despite librarian efforts, House Bill 710 was signed into law in the summer of 2024. In order to avoid lawsuits, librarians promptly removed books that they suspected could be challenged.

“A lot of libraries prepared for it in their own ways. In Idaho Falls, the second floor is where their adult books are. They decided that they would just have signs that nobody under the age of 18 could even go on to the second floor. Donnelly Library, which is really small, did like a waiver that parents would have to sign a waiver that their child could even be in the library if they’re under the age of 18,” Shaltry explained.

West Ada School District, one of the largest districts in Idaho, now has a “710 library” in their district office. This is a collection of controversial books. If students want one of the books from that collection, they must have parental approval.

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In such a high-profile role, Shaltry has taken the brunt of public scrutiny against librarians.

“I have been called a porn pusher and a smut queen at the State House. I have been told that, yeah, that we’re pedophiles and trying to push our agenda onto kids.

“I feel like the first two years were so horrible, like, it was so hard not to break down all the time. Oddly enough, I feel like now I’m like, ‘Cool, whatever.’ Like, ‘That’s the worst you got?’ Which is so horrible, because like, that is a horrible thing to say to somebody,” Shaltry said.

One of the legislators sponsoring House Bill 710 has a page on their website labelled “smut.” It contains all of Shaltry’s letters that she had submitted against the banning legislation. With these personal attacks, Shaltry worries about her teenage kids and their potential involvement. She changed her last name on social media in order to protect her online identity.

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Many of the books being banned in Idaho included topics of sexual abuse. Shaltry welled up with tears as she described the importance of these kinds of topics being available.

“A lot of people had come up to me and said, ‘I wish I had this book when I was younger, because I was being abused by people.’ They said, ‘I would have known that it wasn’t normal, or I would have known that there was hope,’” Shaltry said. She tried to explain this to the legislators in an effort to portray the value of these books. It fell on deaf ears.

“I wish those books didn’t have to exist. I wish that act didn’t exist. While that act is still existing, those books provided things for people.”

Shaltry has witnessed the profound impact of books in numerous ways, and shared multiple other stories.

“I have a friend who’s a teacher at one of the schools [that removed books]...She had a book out that she is not allowed to have in her class. It was not for very long that she had this book out, but a student saw it. He came into her class a few weeks later with his boyfriend. He said, ‘I saw that you had this book and I knew that I could introduce my boyfriend to you.’”

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In this uncertain and frustrating environment, Shaltry finds that the community of library supporters makes the fight easier. Even after the hardest days at the state house, she wants to go back to work in the library to be with library people.

“When [House Bill 710] went into effect, there were people standing outside of our libraries with signs of support for the library and support for library workers and everything,” Shaltry said. “It was beautiful. If I didn’t ever read the news, I would never know that there were people that didn’t like the library.”<sup>19</sup>

## Rebecca Sofferman

Rebecca Sofferman is the head librarian at Colchester Middle School in Colchester, Vermont. Vermont is not a hotspot of book banning activity by any means. It has some of the lowest levels of book bans in the country. Still, in these uncertain times, librarians like Sofferman are intent on preserving the freedom to read. With the Vermont School Library Association, Sofferman has

been a key contributor to protective legislation in Vermont. Sofferman began her career as a librarian in 2009, which was a drastic career switch from her scientific field.

“I always thought that I wanted to be in education, but I never could quite decide what I wanted to do. I had this sort of epiphany almost 20 years ago now. I thought, well, I’ve always loved reading and technology, and this was kind of a way to marry those things together,” Sofferman said. She went back to school at age 38 to get her masters in library science.

A library science degree, or Master of Library Science (MLS), is required in most states for library positions. In getting their MLS, librarians are professionally trained on things like curating book collections.<sup>20</sup>

“My program was specifically designed for school librarians, so it’s designed for getting certification as a teacher and a librarian at the same time. I had to take classes in cataloguing, project management, literature, youth literature...how to teach in the context of library lessons. And then I had to do a practicum and student teaching. It’s similar to teacher prep programs, except there was a focus on libraries as well,” Sofferman said.

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Amidst the current book controversies, Sofferman is frustrated with the lack of trust in librarians to select appropriate books.

“Most schools have a selection material policy. So we know how to adhere to that policy. How to get new books in, how to deselect books when they’re no longer needed for whatever reason...And so we have training in that. And we keep up on our profession. We are constantly reading reviews, keeping up with authors, learning from professional development what books are the hot new thing, or that are useful for curriculum units. We work closely with teachers to make sure they have the materials they need to have books for their classes. All of that is a huge part of our job,” Sofferman said.

She uses resources like Library Journal and Publishers Weekly, which provide recommended ages for books.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Rebecca Sofferman in the library at Colchester Middle School.

“I understand [that] parents want to have a say in their own particular child’s reading, because they know their individual child better than I know their individual child. But I don’t think that parents know what everybody needs. In middle school in particular, you have kids who are still bringing stuffed animals to school everyday. At the other end, you have kids who are already adults because the adult in their home is unable to adult, so they are running the household.

“It is important for us to have a huge range of resources here for the huge range of experiences of students. And individual parents can’t possibly have that background, unless they have an education or library background, to be able to know what everybody needs,” Sofferman said.

“The data is overwhelming that kids need to read what they like or they’re not gonna be readers. If we want them to be lifelong readers – which is really like, the big dream goal – we have to provide what they want to read.”

In curating the library collection, Sofferman makes a conscious effort to include diverse books that represent all of her

students. “It’s my job to make sure that we have resources that will help, will be a good fit or good interest for every kid in the school”

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In 2024, Sofferman was co-president of the Vermont School Library Association (VSLA), a state-wide volunteer organization that advocates for libraries and provides professional development. While Sofferman was president, the VSLA made it a priority to get all libraries a material selection policy in order to protect the right to read.

The Vermont School Board Association has a model selection policy for book collections. Most Vermont libraries adhere to the model policy, but they have never been required to. For a selection policy law, the VLSA worked with Vermont State Representative Bobby Farlice-Rubio and the House of Representatives. Sofferman and the VSLA worked with Farlice-Rubio on the language and ideas. Sofferman and the VSLA wrote letters of support for the new legislation and testified in front of the Senate Education Committee multiple times.

“It was really fascinating because I had never actually gone through that process before,” Sofferman said.

In 2024, Vermont passed Act 150, a law requires libraries to create a material selection policy that includes certain subjects. As summarized on Vermont’s government website:

“ [Act 150] requires all public libraries to adopt material selection policies and procedures for the reconsideration and retention of library materials that comply with the First Amendment, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, State laws prohibiting discrimination in places of public accommodation, and that reflect Vermont’s diverse people and history, including diversity of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, and political beliefs.”<sup>21</sup>

Vermont is one of the first states to implement protective legislation as a response to the nationwide book ban crisis.

Having a set material selection policy protects libraries from controversy. Sofferman said that a motivating factor for the

law was discouraging self censorship, or librarians excluding books that might be challenged.

“A lot of the books that are challenged are due to LGBTQ content, or being about people of color. And the policy pretty carefully specifies that that can’t be the reason why that book isn’t in the library,” Sofferman explained.

“An individual parent could say, ‘I don’t want my kids to read books with LGBTQ characters,’ unfortunately. But we know that we have students that are gay in our schools, and that want to read books that gay characters. They should be able to, and that’s what the law does.”

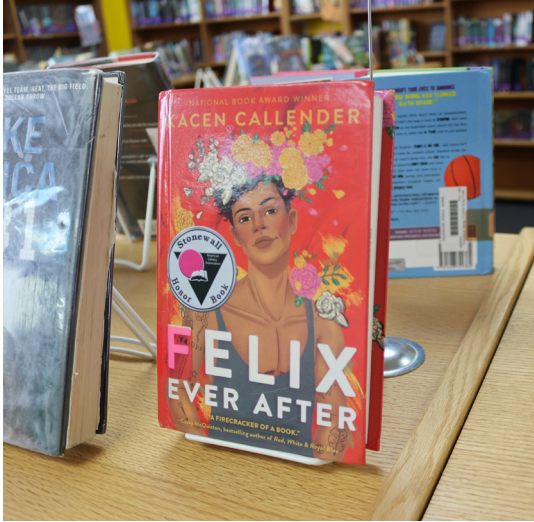
Act 150 was an exciting win for Sofferman, the VSLA and everyone fighting for the right to read.

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In order to get Act 150 passed, the VSLA had to compromise some of their other goals. For example, school librarians are currently underrepresented in Vermont’s government. There is a state librarian that technically represents all librarians, but there is nobody representing school librarians. This position was cut several years ago, but the VSLA was pushing for it to be reopened. This was originally part of Act 150, but it was removed in order to eliminate budget-related hesitations.

There was no major pushback against the law, but some expressed concerns that it was a violation of parental rights. Parental rights present a complicated issue in school libraries and classrooms.

“I’ve seen this happen in the past. If there is a student who is LGBTQ and the parents are against it... we had a student like that at one point, and the parents said they cannot check out any books with LGBTQ content. And this was a middle schooler that knew very firmly that they were. So that’s heartbreaking, but we have to comply with that. We can’t trump a parent in that situation. But it’s really hard, because that student deserves to get what they need.”



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

*Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender a the shelf of Colchester Middle School. The book has been banned in over 10 states for transgender themes.

Sofferman explained that the same policy goes for classrooms as well. A parent may want their kid to be exempt from war movies in history class, or reproduction lessons in health class. This kind of thing happens all the time, and parents technically have the right to make these decisions.

“Maybe it’s a religious thing, maybe it’s ‘I know my kid is really sensitive and they’ll have nightmares forever if they watch this war movie.’ It’s not up to us to decide that for their kid. “The line for me is really when somebody is trying to say what everybody’s kid can read.”

Sofferman said that parent involvement is encouraged when done right. If a parent knows their kid is sensitive to something, teachers want to know. It is all about having healthy, respectful communication.

“Involved parents are wonderful. I would love every parent to be involved as much as possible, because then we can be partners in education, and that’s the goal.”

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Sofferman has never dealt with a formal book challenge that reached the point of reconsideration, but she has had parents object to books in the library. Each time, she was able to have a conversation with the parent.

Sofferman recalled a challenge when she was teaching at an elementary school. A child brought home a book about a boy whose friend died. The book was meant to help kids through the grieving process and teach them how to understand loss.

“The parent came in and was like, ‘My kid is so upset after reading this book, worried that all of his friends were going to die.’ They didn’t want me to take it out of the library, they wanted me to move it to a section where it wouldn’t randomly be grabbed,” Sofferman said.

She decided that this was a valid point. Because the book has a very specific purpose, she did not want any little kid to unknowingly take it off the shelf. The book was still out in the collection, but she moved it from the main shelves.

Other book challenges were not as reasonable. A parent once complained about a book because it had Muslim characters.

“It wasn’t right after 9/11, but it was not too far after. It was when there was still a lot of hate going on, unfortunately. I absolutely did not remove or restrict that book, but I had a conversation with her.”

When asked why she wanted the book removed, the parent could not articulate her point. “I think she realized that what she was saying was racist.”

In these conversations, one must recognize their bias and think about what is best for the kids. “Librarians try to be as unbiased as possible because that’s our job. I don’t like reading horror books. They’re scary. But I have them in the library! Because I know kids like them. So I have to overcome my bias, we have to be as open minded as possible,” Sofferman said.

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As part of the librarian community, Sofferman is overwhelmed by the book bans and library controversies in other states. She empathizes with librarians like Amanda Jones, who is fighting

personal attacks on her library and herself.

“I love my job. And I would be devastated if I lost my job. I would also be devastated if I had to go through what [Jones] is going through, where people in her community are calling her a pedophile because of the books she had in the library... The court of public opinion doesn't always include the truth, so a lot of people believed a lot of really terrible things about her.”

“It's nerve wracking for every librarian, partly for those personal concerns of ‘could I lose my job? Could I go through a smear campaign like that in the community?’” Sofferman said. “But I think the most heartbreaking thing out of all of it is when kids don't have access to books.”<sup>22</sup>

## 3

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# Quiet Motives, Loud Results

The motives behind banning books are layered and often unclear. On the surface, the motivation is pure: people do not want any children reading what they deem inappropriate or obscene. Whether or not these wishes are valid or respectful, the concerns about the content of banned books are seemingly genuine. Parents and community members leverage children's safety as the basis of their argument. But the content being removed, as well as the political affiliations of book banning groups, reveal deeper, unspoken goals.

A challenge in deciphering the intentions of book bans is the argument that books are not being banned at all. Among the groups pushing for bans, the general consensus is that community members are simply exercising their rights to dictate the content that kids are exposed to. They do not see the act of book removals as censorship.

This became a barrier in my discussions with people who are pushing for book bans. When asked to address the other side of the argument (the concept of censorship and lack of book access), interviewees were unwilling to validate these ideas. The dismissal

of the reality of book bans and potential harm of censorship made it difficult to dig deeper into their motives. Outside of my conversations, this type of response is reflected in broader media appearances from politicians and group leaders. Therefore, the layers of quiet intentions are left up to interpretation based on the stated goals.

## **Eliminating Discomfort**

As outlined in chapter 1, books with LGBTQ and BIPOC themes and authors are disproportionately banned. 44% of banned books feature characters of color, and 39% feature LGBTQ characters or themes. 19% of banned authors identify as LGBTQ, and 39% of authors are BIPOC. Book bans clearly reflect issues with these identities being represented.

In some cases, LGBTQ identities are outright stated as the reason for bans. The wave of “Don’t Say Gay” legislation reflects a movement of people explicitly against the representation of LGBTQ people in schools. After Florida passed the most prominent “Don’t Say Gay” law, dozens of other states introduced copycat bills. There are no hidden motivations with this type of banning legislation, because people can simply say they are against LGBTQ representation. The attack on the LGBTQ community is clear.

Tiffany Justice is the co-founder of Moms for Liberty, a conservative organization that advocates against the teaching of LGBTQ topics, racial discrimination and critical race theory in schools. They are the most prominent group in the fight to ban books. There are Moms for Liberty chapters in 48 states, but the group is based in Florida.

Justice and co-founder Tina Descovich started the group in 2021, when COVID and at-home learning gave them a closer look into school curriculum. “Parents were shocked to see some of the content their children were learning in school. Anti-family, anti-God, anti-white, anti-America, this very divisive, toxic curriculum laced with critical theory, gender ideology,” Justice said. “It’s absolutely ridiculous. They should be teaching kids how to

read, how to write, how to do math, learn science. They should be learning history, all history, accurate history. But the idea that somehow we have time to teach children about sexual orientation, or it's the business of teachers to discuss these types of things with children is nonsense.

"You want to learn about gender identity, you should send them to a different school, because public school gender ideology is pseudo scientific nonsense. It's absolute nonsense. It's like teaching kids that two plus two equals five. Saying 'Maybe you were born in the wrong body,' that's the same thing as lying to them and saying two plus two equals five. So we shouldn't lie to kids in school. We should tell the truth. We need to tell the truth in school."

Justice expressed her gratitude for the Trump administration's dedication to ending what she calls "transgender insanity." She claimed that transgender people are mentally ill, and denied their existence altogether.

In her home state of Florida, where the "Don't Say Gay" agenda has succeeded, this discomfort with diversity and queerness has been validated.

Other times, people cannot claim this as a valid reason for book removal. States with LGBTQ protective legislation would not remove books simply on the basis of being inclusive. Instead, claims of books being sexually explicit are most frequently used to remove LGBTQ books. Several states have laws that require the inclusion of topics regarding gender and sexual identity, and yet these themes are still banned from their schools and libraries.<sup>1</sup>

For example, Colorado's state curricular standards require the inclusion of LGBTQ topics. There are also state laws protecting LGBTQ students from discrimination and exclusion. Still, LGBTQ-centric books like *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe and *Flamer* by Mike Curato were some of Colorado's most banned books of 2023. The books are not technically being removed because they feature LGBTQ themes and stories; the reason for removal is that the books are "obscene," "sexually explicit," or "pornographic." While both books contain mature themes of sexual exploration, the authors deny that they are pornographic by any

means. According to Curato has specifically spoken out about queer stories being unnecessarily sexualized.<sup>2</sup> According to Common Sense Media, a trusted source for determining age-appropriateness, both books are suitable for children 16 or older.<sup>3</sup>

Still, protective legislation does not protect against claims of obscenity, and it has therefore become a loophole for the removal of these topics. The unspoken motivations become clear based on the types of books being removed.<sup>4,5</sup>

A similar trend is occurring in other states with inclusive curriculum laws, such as Illinois, California, and Oregon. Michael Lunsford, executive director of the conservative organization Citizens for a New Louisiana, is adamant that the books being removed are “pornographic” and “erotic.” Lunsford dismisses the argument that these books are valuable whatsoever.

“[They called us] Christian nationalist fascists that are trying to block children from access to life saving information. That’s actually what some of the gay community folks that showed up at one of the meetings told me. It’s like, ‘You all are a bunch of fascists trying to block children from life saving information.’ Well, whose life are you going to save by these instructions on the use of adult novelty toys? Whose life does that save?” Lunsford said.

When asked about the LGBTQ community supporting banned books, Lunsford said this is untrue. He believes that those protecting books have co-opted the LGBTQ community in order to further their agenda. “They’ve managed to trick people, usually in the gay community, to show up,” Lunsford said.

Citizens for a New Louisiana has built a significant following by pushing the narrative of pornography in libraries. On their website, “Fighting against pornography & erotica in the library’s kids section” is listed as one of their top priorities.<sup>6</sup>

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The quiet motivations behind book bans are especially apparent when it comes to BIPOC books, specifically books regarding Black history. Few people are saying that they want a book removed in order to erase Black history. This argument would be likely dismissed as racist. Instead, the removal of Black history

from schools is being hidden behind language of equality.

Critical race theory has become one of the book ban buzzwords. It is one of the most prominent elements of the content being removed from libraries and schools. Critical race theory is the idea that persistent racial discrimination in the United States has created a hierarchy on the basis of race. This hierarchy is woven into all elements of American society and behavior. The term was first introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law and Columbia Law School. Critical race theory recognizes the systemic racism in America, which is a crucial part of dismantling it.<sup>7</sup>

Critics of the theory claim that it promotes racial divisions. In 2025, after Donald Trump took presidential office, he began a war on critical race theory. He released an executive order titled “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling.” The order deemed that the teaching of critical race theory is “indoctrination” and an “inherently racist policy.” Trump ordered that all academic institutions that receive federal funding no longer teach critical race theory, or “radical gender ideology.”

As of 2025, 18 states have laws restricting the teaching of critical race theory in schools. These states include: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. The vast majority of these restrictive laws prohibit teaching that “one race is inherently superior to another race.” Also, anything that causes “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual’s race or sex.” This exact language is found quite frequently among proposed bills and laws. Some legislation states outright that critical race theory is banned.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the language seemingly promotes racial equality and harmony. Teaching that one race is not superior to another race sounds like an effort against discrimination. Trump’s executive order is veiled in anti-discriminatory language, claiming that the goal is to become less racist. However, the result has been the removal of Black history from schools, stripping curriculums and librar-

ies of critical elements of American history. Teachers across the country, like Anthony Crawford in Oklahoma, have been forced to remove all elements of Black history from their curriculums out of fear of conflicting with regulations. This has left students without a clear, representative picture of history.

Much of it is wrapped up in the avoidance of white guilt. For example, a 2023 law passed in Arkansas states prohibits teaching that anyone “bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.” It also bars the concept that anyone is “inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” This reflects a discomfort with America’s oppressive history. Learning about slavery may make white students feel guilty. Critical race theory forces students to come face-to-face with their internalized, unconscious racism. These laws seek to eliminate this discomfort and remove the topics altogether, whether it is Black history or racism in general.<sup>9,10</sup>

Experts are expressing concern over the loss of a diverse historical education. In an interview with Northeastern Global News, Adrianna Crossing, a psychology professor at Northeastern University said “There are all these little ways where trust and empathy between groups isn’t getting its best chance to thrive if we’re depriving students of racially realistic education.”<sup>11</sup>

## Parental Rights

The most common argument behind book bans is parental rights in education. People believe that parents have the right to dictate what their child consumes, and therefore can remove books from libraries and schools. Parents rights activists believe that parents should be the main voice in public schools, trumping teachers in decisions on curriculum. The discussion of parental rights has ramped up alongside book controversies, becoming more relevant than ever before. The parent’s rights movement is led by conservative politicians and groups.<sup>12</sup>

The term “parental rights” is loosely thrown around in conversations of book bans. The true meaning of the term, and the actual legal rights to back it up, are often misunderstood. It is true

that parents technically have rights in their child's education, but those rights are not unlimited.

There are a few federal laws that protect parent rights in education. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, which passed in 1974, gives parents the right to review instructional material and access what their children are learning.<sup>13</sup> The Family Rights and Educational Privacy Act, also passed in 1974, allows parents access to their child's educational records.<sup>14</sup> The Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution addresses parental rights in education in the Due Process Clause. It states that parents have the right to direct the "educational upbringing" of their child. This means that parents have the right to decide the type of education their children receive (homeschool, public school, etc.)<sup>15</sup>

Though these laws address parental rights in education, they are not related to parental control over curriculum content.

Still, they are often leveraged by parental rights activists. The America First Policy Institute, a Trump advocacy organization, published an article in support of the establishment of Parents' Bill of Rights legislation. The organization used the Fourteenth Amendment as proof that parental rights are part of constitutional rights, and therefore parents are meant to be the educational decision makers.<sup>16</sup>

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As of 2025, 18 states have established a Parents' Bill of Rights, laws that expand parent access to and control over curriculum. They typically call for teachers to share all curriculum material with parents, and allow parents to opt out of any material they choose. Elements of these laws can be an overreach of student privacy. For example, in 2025 Florida passed House Bill 8, their Parents' Bill of Rights. The law requires educators to alert a student's parents if they are gay, potentially outing students who do not feel safe at home.<sup>17, 18</sup>

In 2025, the Department of Education (under the Trump administration) declared that parental rights would become priority. A January press release, Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Craig Trainor said, "...the department is beginning the process of

restoring the fundamental rights of parents to direct their children's education." With the shift of political power, parental rights have been boosted and validated.<sup>19</sup>

Jeffrey Shulman, a law professor at Georgetown University, explores the legal boundaries of parental rights in education in the study, "The Parent as (Mere) Educational Trustee: Whose Education Is It, Anyway?"

Shulman argues that laws for parental rights are misinterpreted, and America has never given parents a higher authority in education than professionals. Although the law guarantees parental control over custody and basic standards of upbringing, Shulman writes, "The law has long recognized that the state's duty to educate children is superior to any parental right."

Furthermore, Shulman asserts that too much parental involvement in education contradicts the original purpose of schools. Education is meant to be a path toward expanded ideas and intellectual exploration. Because parents are entrusted with raising their children until it is time for them to explore new perspectives, parents have difficulty letting go of control. Shulman empathizes with parents, who want to shield their children from what they believe is harmful. Still, he feels that their total-control in educational spaces runs the risk of stunting their development. In this way, parental control does not protect children at all.

"The liberal state provides a much needed check on the narcissism of the child's guardians, both public and private. It provides an education that, at its best, makes young adults truly free — free to stand and free to fall," Schulman writes.<sup>20</sup>

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As the parental rights movement has empowered community members to ban books, teachers and librarians have felt invalidated in their professional realms. Vermont librarian Rebecca Sofferman elaborated on this perspective.

"I understand people wanting to make sure that parents have a right to know what their kids are learning and have some say, but it's frustrating that in education in general that there's this lack of recognition of the professionals that are trained to do work

in education, as opposed to school boards and families that sometimes have no education background whatsoever. That distrust of educators is difficult sometimes,” Sofferman said.

Moms for Liberty has based their platform on the movement for parental rights in education. Co-founder Tiffany Justice, and Moms for Liberty as a whole, was fundamental in the passing of Florida’s Parents’ Bill of Rights. Justice explained that parents should be given full control over what their children learn in school. She believes that the National Education Association is “corrupt,” and expressed full distrust in teachers and school boards. This mindset is eroding the public perception of teachers, librarians, and public education as a whole. As outlined in chapter two, this diminishing trust is reflected in national polls. Trust is considerably lower among Republican respondents.<sup>21</sup>

“I mean, there’s no there’s no conflict of power dynamic. Parents are the ones that are in charge. And if teachers think that they should have some say in a child’s life beyond just teaching them the expected standards in the classroom, they’re sorely mistaken,” Justice said.

Justice asserted that “parents have the fundamental right to direct the upbringing of their children, that includes their education,” directly quoting the Fourteenth Amendment. She also referenced the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment as the basis of her argument.

Justice rejects the notion that Moms for Liberty is a book banning organization. “The whole book banning thing was used as a political legend by the left to try to villainize parents and to try to make us radioactive... it is absolutely nonsense. I’m so incredibly proud of the moms for continuing to engage on this issue in a fearless manner, because we really felt that once we saw the graphic sexual content in the books, we had a moral obligation to address it,” Justice said.<sup>22</sup>

Although Sofferman is frustrated with the push for parental rights, she thinks that groups like Moms for Liberty truly believe they are protecting kids.

“I think that parents and teachers have the same goal always, which is to help kids learn and thrive. It’s just that we might

have different beliefs about what that can be. So I think that if we can keep those goals in mind and keep having conversations instead of just throwing insults around on social media, and actually have conversations face-to-face, then we can find that we're really on the same page," Sofferman said.

Although Sofferman values parental input in their child's education, she draws the line at parents trying to make decisions for every kid.

"A lot of people for restrictions on schools and libraries are looking at it just through their own personal lens, and not necessarily understanding that big picture that we are here for everybody," Sofferman said.

## Transparency

Another frequent term among book banning groups is transparency. This is along the same lines of parental rights. These parents and community members demand that their governments become more transparent, which includes providing access to what government funded schools and libraries are providing children.

Citizens for a New Louisiana (CFNL) is a prominent force behind book bans, and base their efforts on the goal of transparency in government. It is a non-profit conservative organization based in Lafayette, Louisiana. The group investigates government actions with the goal of uncovering wrongdoings or misspending. Library controversies regarding funding or books is one of their primary focuses.

In 2019, Lunsford and CFNL campaigned to defund the Lafayette Public Library. After researching library spending, he felt that the library was overfunded and did not need the amount they were given. Since then, CFNL has put libraries under the microscope.

"Everything we've done is focused around one key thing, which is transparency," Lunsford said. He continuously described the work of CFNL with the metaphor of "shining a flashlight in the dark corners," exposing the inner workings of Louisiana government.



*Photo courtesy of Michael Lunsford*

Michael Lunsford in a video announcement for the Citizens for a New Louisiana Facebook page.

“The idea is, if people really knew what their government was doing, their government would probably stop doing it...If people knew that the library had a \$42 million fund balance that’s effectively good for four years without any more money, would they continue to fund it? If the average person knew that their library was buying erotic books for the children’s section at the library, would the library continue doing that?” Lunsford said.

The CFNL stirred up rage in the community when the Lafayette Public Library was planning to host Drag Queen Story Hour, an event where drag queens read children’s books to kids. There are chapters of Drag Queen Story Hour across the country, and it has become quite popular as a library event. When it was coming to Lafayette, CNFL presented the event as library mis-spending. They garnered enough opposition in the community to get the event shut down.

“As far as I know, we’re the only organization that has actually stopped a taxpayer funded drag queen story time from taking place anywhere in the United States. So that’s pretty impressive,” Lunsford said.

CNFL has been on a mission to expose public libraries for providing “obscene” material to children. They see this as another way to expose government wrongdoings and protect the community.

Amanda Jones, a Lafayette school librarian and author of *That Librarian*, sued Lunsford and CNFL in 2022 for defamation. Lunsford had made social media posts directly attacking Jones for providing LGBTQ inclusive books in the library. One of the books was *Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being Human* by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan. Lunsford’s posts claimed that Jones was pushing pornography and erotic content onto children, sparking widespread community backlash. Lunsford said that he was simply exposing the truth and did not defame her.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the court case, Lunsford never spoke with Jones face to face. The lack of communication between parties certainly contributes to the lack of understanding.

As Jones was rising to prominence with high-profile media appearances, backlash against the CNFL rose. Lunsford said he received death threats. However, the exposure ended up being positive for the CNFL mission. Across Louisiana, more people have joined as members since the lawsuit, and the organization is more well known than ever. They continue to search for controversial books in libraries in their effort for transparency.<sup>24</sup>

## The Political Incentive

One does not have to read between the lines to see the political ties to the book ban frenzy. The vast majority of groups pushing for book bans are affiliated with the Republican party. Book banning legislation is almost always introduced by Republican legislators.

The removal of LGBTQ and BIPOC stories and identities aligns with Republican party ideals. Donald Trump and the Republican party have made consistent efforts against minorities and inclusive policies, even aside from book banning legislation. When

Trump took office in 2024, he made the elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) a priority. DEI is a term used to describe any programs or regulations that protect against discrimination. It is employed in schools and workplaces. DEI protocol is the reason why many companies try to hire a diverse range of employees, or why people cannot be paid unequally based on their race or gender. DEI is based on the concept of equity, giving marginalized groups a seat at the table. Trump called DEI “illegal and immoral,” saying it is unfair to treat people differently based on their identity. Companies across the country have slashed DEI programs after Trump made an executive order demanding their removal.<sup>25, 26</sup>

In the spirit of purging all “woke” initiatives, the Trump administration also removed hundreds of terms from government agency websites and documents. These terms include “gender identity,” “antiracist,” “LGBTQ,” and “BIPOC.”<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that anti-inclusivity is part of the Republican agenda, and the book banning crisis is rooted in this political mindset. But the question is not about the involvement of politics in this issue. The question is whether or not political gain is the motive for book bans. Politicians who have based their platforms on parental rights in education have risen to prominence based on the issue. There is a clear political benefit of fanning the flames of book controversies. When voters are riled up over book issues, they lean further into the political party claiming to solve the problem.

In 2023, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin based his campaign on his “Parents Matter” slogan. In 2022 Florida Governor Ron DeSantis used the slogan “Protect Children, Support Parents” in order to pass book banning legislation. These politicians have gained political power and furthered their agendas based on the support and fears of parents.<sup>28, 29</sup>

In the 2024 study, “U.S. Book Banning as Radicalized Political Strategy,” Barbara Becnel suggests that book bans be re-framed as political strategy with the goal of mobilizing voters rather than a censorship crisis. Benel writes, “The current book-banning campaign in the U.S. has been spawned, at least in part, by a powerful national narrative purposefully constructed to attract the votes of the citizenry targeted by this example of strategic political

propaganda.”<sup>30</sup>

Book bans seem to be politically motivated even on a local level. The 2021 study “Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. schools” found that American counties with a lower share of Republican votes in the 2020 presidential election had higher levels of book bans. This is contradictory to the notion that more Republicans would mean more bans. However, it reveals that the motivation for bans is likely tied to the mobilization of voters. A smaller share of Republican votes means that Republicans make stronger efforts to mobilize voters. Therefore, the effort to ban books is more prevalent.<sup>31</sup>

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The political motivation behind book bans is especially clear when examining the public opinion. According to a 2022 NPR poll, 76% of parents are satisfied with what their kids are learning in school. Those who are unsatisfied are the clear minority. Only 18% of parents are not happy with the way gender and sexuality are being taught. 19% are unhappy with the way racial issues are taught, and 14% are unhappy with the way U.S. history is being taught. Based on the level of book bans and restrictive legislation, one might think that dissatisfaction in schools is much higher.<sup>32</sup>

With a small minority unhappy with school teachings, who are these politicians fighting for? The fact that most parents do not actually have a problem with schools further proves that book controversies are being constructed by those who stand to gain from the fear and rage.

“Book bans are not popular with the people,” Sofferan said. “They are a popular political touchtone. If it’s really about protecting kids, there’s so many other things people would be doing instead of this. The fact that they’re focusing on library books? It’s just become a political soapbox issue with politicians.”<sup>33</sup>

## 4

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# The Censorship Question

Censorship is a scary word. Americans have been raised to believe that their freedom of speech is guaranteed and valued. Any potential instance of censorship sounds alarm bells, threatening freedoms at the core of American identity. When I think of censorship, I think of countries like North Korea and China, who imprison journalists for speaking out against the government and block anti-government information from the internet. But censorship is not always so extreme. First Amendment rights protect freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but censorship can still slip through the cracks of this constitutional framework. Despite our perception of a free America, censorship is on the rise in more ways than one.

The censorship label is part of why book banning is such an outrage. Of course, there is debate over whether or not book banning is actually censorship. Because books are not being physically burned or specifically outlawed, people claim that the word censorship is an overreaction. This is related to the argument surrounding the word “ban,” outlined in chapter one. If nothing is actually banned, this is not a censorship issue.

Like book banning in general, censorship concerns are related to political views. Each end of the political spectrum feels differently about where American censorship is headed. In 2025, 32% of “very liberal” Americans believed that free speech is headed in the right direction. This is a decrease from 2024. On the other end of the spectrum, 49% of “very conservative” Americans believe that freedom of expression is going in the right direction, an increase from the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

In 2023, *National Review*, a conservative editorial magazine, published an article titled “Book Curation is Not Censorship.” Daniel Buck asserts that there is a difference between the deplatforming or relocation of a book and the censoring of topics. “Lumping all of these together under the term ‘censorship’ — or, at the most panicked, associating them with Nazi book burnings — inhibits our ability to discuss the real, consequential, and ancient debate in question here: What should our kids read?” Buck writes.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Lunsford, leader of book banning organization Citizens for a New Louisiana, is not as certain about censorship.

“Is it censorship, or isn’t it? I don’t know. Certainly, I’m sure [an author] would be frustrated they’re being censored for not allowing their content to get in front of the intended audience, which is children,” Lunsford said. “But at the same time, I think children are our most vulnerable and in most need of protection against these types of things.”

Beginning my research, I was unsure of the censorship label. I was skeptical of the use of the word in media coverage, perceiving it as a potential fear tactic. I wondered if the word was being leveraged to generate panic among audiences. After all, it seemed as though book bans were an ineffective mode of censorship, which would eliminate the need to sound the censorship alarm.

The Censorship Question is twofold:

- 1) Are these modern book bans real, effective censorship?
- 2) If so, what legal framework allows for modern day censorship?

# Censorship, Effective or Not

## Defining Censorship

The basic definition of censorship, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.”<sup>3</sup> By this basic definition, removal of book access on any level is technically censorship. Even when books are not totally banned, suppressing their circulation is censoring them.

Lynette Mejía, the executive director of Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship, is passionate about the censorship label. “We consider all of those things censorship activities and banning activities, even though they’re not specifically taking books out of the library. Whatever that happens to look like in terms of removing access, that’s still censorship, that’s still a book ban, and so we are against it,” Mejía said.

Aside from the basic definition, the level of censorship is also being discussed. Eugene Volokh, a First Amendment law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, believes that book banning is censorship, but not total censorship.

“Let’s say that there’s a law that says you can sell this book, but you can only sell it online, you can’t sell it in a bookstore. Well, that’s not a total ban. I think that is a form of censorship, although not complete censorship. It would be unconstitutional,” Volokh said.

“Soft censorship” is a term frequently used to describe modern book bans. Elyla Huertas, the senior staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of New Jersey, discussed the definition of censorship in a 2023 article. Huertas wrote, “Banning books is a type of censorship, but the act can take many forms. Removing a book from the shelf isn’t the only method that amounts to censorship – requiring parental permission to read it or moving it to a less accessible section are both examples of soft censorship.”<sup>4</sup>

James Blasingame is a professor of English at Arizona

State University who specializes in censorship. He asserted that book bans are a violation of First Amendment rights.

“The First Amendment includes equal access to ideas as well as free speech, and a book has made it into a school library or a school curriculum. Now you take it out, you’re denying the people at that school access to those ideas” Blasingame said.

“They say [people] can get [the books] somewhere else. No, you can’t do that. You’re still you’re removing, you’re violating their First Amendment rights.”

## Is it Effective?

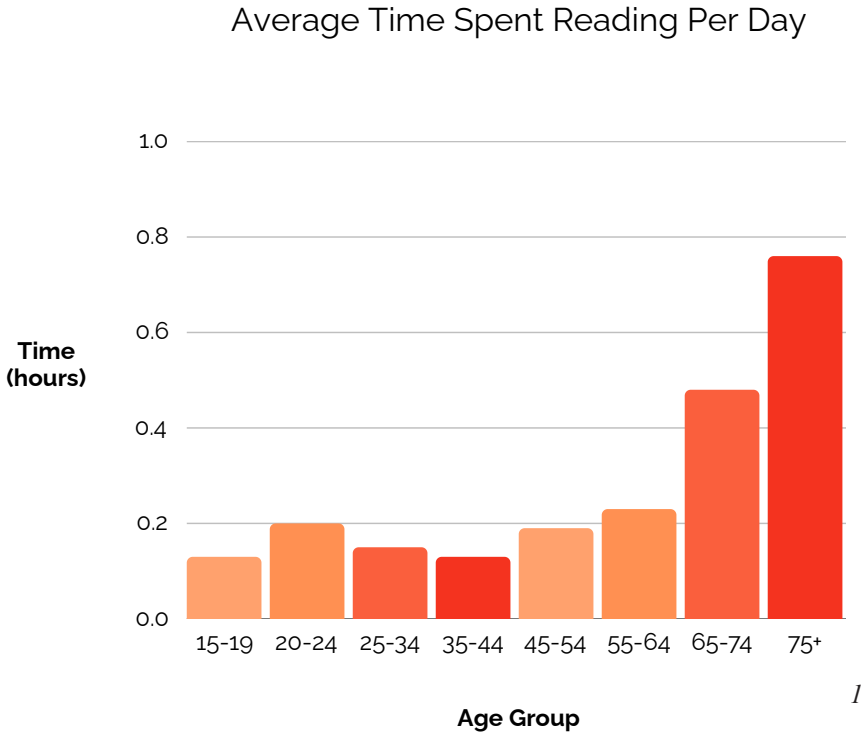
While the removal of access to books is censorship, it is not necessarily an effective censorship tactic.

Book readership has declined over the last decade, particularly among people under the age of 35, and libraries have been in steady decline as community centers.<sup>5</sup> Public libraries struggle to compete with bookstore giants. Amazon, one of the most dominant players in book publishing, has stopped selling over 10,000 of its e-books to libraries. Libraries are no longer primarily relied on for book access.<sup>6,7</sup>

Typically, the books that are challenged and banned were not even popular to begin with. In the 2024 study, “Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. schools,” researchers discovered low national interest in books being challenged. Based on internet searches, interest in books actually increased after they were banned or challenged. This is related to the “Streisand Effect,” the phenomenon that restricting information only brings more attention to it. In her school library in New York, Beth Cuddy attested to the Streisand Effect taking effect after *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson was challenged. The book had not been checked out before the controversy, but suddenly became a “hot commodity.”<sup>8</sup>

There is widespread internet access in the United States, and the internet is the primary mode of accessing information. As of 2024, 97% of American children have internet access.<sup>9</sup> Any topic being targeted through book bans (gender identity, for example) can be accessed through the internet. There is certainly a cultural

threat to the identities being targeted, but these topics will not be erased completely through book bans.



Curriculum bans, however, hold more weight. The removal of Black history books, or content that discusses race at all, will effectively alter the worldview of students. The national understanding of American history will be lacking significant elements. If kids are not learning about slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, they will not understand the institutionalized racism that prevails in this country. This risks a future of repeating a discriminatory past. James Blasingame is concerned about the lasting impact of bans despite the ability to access a book elsewhere.

“If you tell kids, ‘You’re not supposed to read that,’ that’s not going to work. They’re probably going to go out and find it anyway. But how much better to have books read in school with

discussion groups handled by teachers? And [when] parents are aware of the curriculum, and they get to read the book and talk about it?” Blasingame said.

“So I think it’s harmful to our educational system, and it’s harmful to raising educated citizens. One of the things about a democracy that we heard from our founding fathers was that we need to have an educated citizenry. And when you’re banning books, you’re not helping that at all.”

• • •

Because bans have a generally soft impact, it is strange that they are a major focus among politicians and state governments. As covered in the previous chapter, the use of book bans as a political mobilizer is certainly a motivation behind them. Their ineffectiveness supports this notion that political gain is the primary goal. However, the choice of books rather than another form of media is puzzling.

Banned author Ellen Hopkins theorizes that the choice to go after books comes down to money. Governments do not want to censor digital media (such as social media) because it is profitable. Hopkins referenced the 2025 effort to ban the popular social media platform TikTok. Because the app is owned by a Chinese company, there were concerns that information could be manipulated by the Chinese government. The ban was passed by the Biden administration, and briefly went into effect. It stirred discussions of media censorship and the negative economic impact of losing TikTok. Within a month, Donald Trump signed an executive order that would delay the TikTok ban.<sup>10</sup>

“They’re all worried and content for TikTok. And then is TikTok still there? Yeah, it’s still there. Has it been censored? Not as far as I can tell. Will it in the future? Probably not, because it’s too valuable, you know...they’ll find a way around it,” Hopkins said. “Books they don’t see the monetary value in. It’s more of the emotional value.”

In 2023, paid advertising and marketing on TikTok drove \$14.7 billion in revenue for small businesses in the United States.

It was estimated to contribute \$24.2 billion to the United States gross domestic product, and supported roughly 224,000 jobs.<sup>11</sup>

The economic benefit of digital media platforms makes them less enticing to censor or challenge. Although books make for less impactful censorship, they are an easy target.

Furthermore, books pose more of a cultural threat than digital content because of their permanence. Hopkins explained, “And once a book’s written right and printed, you can’t adjust the content... That stuff’s already there, those words are on those pages. So the only way to get rid of them is to, like, you know, burn them.”<sup>12</sup>

## How it Happens

If book banning is indeed censorship, it is hard to understand how it is allowed in modern America. Censorship is antithetical to freedom of speech, so it would seem as though First Amendment rights would protect against book bans. However, censorship is not necessarily a violation of First Amendment rights. Freedom of speech is not absolute, and its limitations are being leveraged by book banning entities.

The poor public opinion of book banning presents another unanswered question regarding its allowance. Polling results are consistent: the vast majority of Americans believe that books should not be removed from a library based on the opinions of a community member. Those who believe libraries contain inappropriate books are a small minority. If most Americans are against book bans, how is legislation being passed?

## Obscenity

There are several categories of speech not protected by the First Amendment. These include incitement, defamation, and obscenity, among others. With today’s book challenges, claims of obscenity are typically a fast-track to getting a book removed. “Obscene” has become a book banning buzzword, used loosely when

discussing books that do not fit that description.

Although obscenity is subjective, there are legal measures in place intended to define and test for it. The Miller Test was introduced in 1973, after the Supreme Court case *Miller v. California*. The case exemplified the need to create guidelines for determining true obscenity. The three-pronged test is still used in American courts. The three guidelines, according to the U.S. Department of Justice website, are as follows:

“Whether the average person, applying contemporary adult community standards, finds that the matter, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests...

“Whether the average person, applying contemporary adult community standards, finds that the matter depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way

“Whether a reasonable person finds that the matter, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”<sup>13</sup>

Essentially, any offensive depiction of sexual conduct results in test failure, but the overall value of the work is taken into consideration. Volokh said that very few books being debated would actually qualify as obscene. According to the ACLU, few books have actually been deemed obscene since the Miller Test was created.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Groups who use obscenity to justify book challenges often fail to use the test in its entirety, and use the test’s inherent subjectivity to their advantage. For example, Michael Lunsford and Citizens for a New Louisiana have based their book challenges and bans on his view that the books are legally obscene. However, in our conversation, Lunsford consistently referenced pages or excerpts of the books, and has not read them. This is a failure to meet the requirements of the Miller Test, which require that the work be “taken as a whole.”<sup>16, 17</sup>

Lynette Mejía is the executive director of Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship, a group fighting for libraries and working in direct opposition to the CFNL. Mejía attested to the fact that book challengers rarely read the entire book. “Michael Lunsford has his little list of books, but they never want to talk about the

book as a whole. They never want to talk about what the purpose of the book is. They just want to show you a single page or a single passage out of that book. So it's kind of hard to seriously engage with people like that. They're not serious about sitting down and really thinking about book content," Mejía said.

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Aside from being thrown around in local book challenges, obscenity is also being leveraged in court cases regarding books. In 2022, Virginia residents protested to get two books outlawed for being "obscene for unrestricted viewing by minors." The books were *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe and *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah J. Maas, both of which contain sexual content. The books were found in local public schools and Barnes & Noble bookstores.

During the trial, the authors and publishers were ordered to show cause that the books were not obscene. The case was ultimately dismissed, and the books did not qualify as obscene. This case is an example of First Amendment protections taking time to come into effect. According to James Blasingame, while it may seem that book banning groups are not bumping into First Amendment rights, they eventually will in court. "They're being held accountable, but it'll take time," Blasingame said.<sup>18</sup>

In Iowa, a bill to expand the limits of obscenity scrutiny in schools was introduced in 2025. The bill proposes that educational purpose or value be disregarded in matters of obscenity. A similar bill was passed in Tennessee in 2023. Changing the definition of obscenity puts more material on the chopping block.<sup>19</sup>

## Viewpoint-based Bans

A book being defined as obscene is not the only way it can be removed from a school or library. "Most of these things, under any definition of obscene, are not going to be obscene. But that's not the end of the story," Volokh said.

Just because a book is not obscene does not mean it technically cannot be removed from a school or library. The ultimate question is whether a book can be removed based on viewpoint

This question has no definitive answer, and opens discussions of the limitations of First Amendment rights. *Island Trees School District v. Pico* was a landmark court case regarding the legality of book bans and viewpoint-based bans. This was the first time the United States Supreme court addressed book removals in libraries and schools.

According to Volokh, *Island Trees v. Pico* occurred in New York in 1982. The Island Trees Union Free School District's Board of Education removed books from its school libraries on the basis that they were anti-American or simply inappropriate. In response, a group of high school students filed a lawsuit against the board, claiming that it was a violation of First Amendment rights. In the end, the Supreme Court split in a way that left no binding precedent at the federal level. The split was based on the concept of viewpoint.

"Four justices said, 'It's okay for a school district to decide not to buy certain books. It's okay for a school district to remove books that are viewed as age inappropriate, perhaps because they are pervasively vulgar or otherwise sexually themed. But you can't remove an already purchased book from the shelf, if based on its viewpoint'" Volokh said.

Removing a book based on viewpoint would mean removing a completely appropriate, First Amendment protected book. The reason for removal would be that the library simply does not like or agree with its contents.

"Four other justices said, 'Of course you can remove a book based on its viewpoint or for other reasons.' If the school decides it doesn't like some book, it doesn't have to keep it on its shelves, especially because in a school, the school library is kind of an adjunct of the curriculum."

The second four justices argued that, although library books are not required reading, they could be seen as recommended. Therefore, it should be okay for a school to not want to recommend certain books to its students based on their viewpoint as an entity.

The final Supreme Court justice said that the viewpoint issue does not need to be resolved in this case. Because the case was about age appropriateness, they only needed to look at this factor.

In this regard, the final justice sided with the first four justices, and the students won the case. This set the general precedent that content-based book removals are unconstitutional.

Still, the case left no binding law regarding viewpoint. Today, different court circuits follow different sides of the argument, resulting in varying results in book ban cases.

“The question is, to what extent should the government be able to say, ‘these materials are perfectly protected by the First Amendment, we just don’t want to distribute it?’” Volokh said. He gave an example of a bookstore at a national park, which would be owned by the government. He said to imagine that one of their books is challenged for being racist.

“Presumably, the government would say, ‘We don’t want to distribute racist books in our bookstore. They’re not obscene, they’re fully protected, other books are free to distribute them, we just don’t want to be the ones to do it.’ I think, in those kinds of situations, it’s perfectly clear, we wouldn’t call that censorship, because it’s the government deciding what it wants to distribute in its own bookstores. So the question is whether the same thing applies to libraries, public libraries or school libraries,” Volokh said.

He personally agrees with the second four justices of the *Island Trees v. Pico* case, and argues that books can be removed based on the viewpoint of the community.

“The schools aren’t owned by the librarians, they’re owned by the state. The way the state is operated, the employers in a sense are the people and the state legislature. The state legislature is the one that provides a lot of the funding. People elect the school board and the librarians work for them,” Volokh said.<sup>20, 21</sup>

## Getting the Votes

Considering the low public opinion of book bans, it is surprising that restrictive legislation gets enough support in government to be passed. In general, those fighting for book bans on the local level are a small minority. So how are legislators and politicians getting the votes?

As discussed in chapter 3, book bans are deeply political,

and appeal to the polarization among American voters. Political mobilization is a significant driver of book banning efforts, specifically from Republican politicians. “You take a Ron DeSantis, for example, in Florida, and he’s good at telling people what they want to hear,” Blasingame said.<sup>22</sup>

Lynette Mejía, the executive director of Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship, has found that people will vote for their political party regardless of some of the issues at stake. “Many times, people don’t look past the letter after a person’s name, and really the politicians themselves don’t encourage that,” Mejía said.

A 2024 poll found that nearly 50% of American voters view the opposing political party as “downright evil.”<sup>23</sup> Increasing political polarization has made voters less likely to diverge from their own camp. The result is policies being overlooked in the name of party lines. In 2022, 63% of registered Democrats and 71% of registered Republicans said that it was highly unlikely that they would ever vote for the opposing party. This suggests that even those who are not majorly passionate about book bans, or are against the removal of library books, could be voting for the politicians leading the charge.<sup>24</sup>

“I’ve talked to people on social media and what have you where it’s like they’ve literally said, ‘I’ll never vote for a Democrat.’” Like, it doesn’t matter what that person stands for, if that person is more center left or, you know, whatever. [They’ll] never vote for a Democrat” Mejía said.

“And by the same token, if you’re always voting for one party, how do you know you’re not voting for someone who’s corrupt? How do you know you’re not voting for someone who’s just using this issue to get elected like unless you scratch a little deeper?”

Mejía is concerned about polarization leading to a lack of communication. The book banning debate cannot be solved when people are so deeply entrenched in their own sides.<sup>25</sup>

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Huda Shaltry, the legislative chair of the Idaho Public Library Association, is on the ground floor of the legislative process-

es in the Idaho Statehouse. Shaltry is usually involved in conversations and decisions regarding book legislation.

Shaltry does not feel like restrictive legislation is representative of what people actually want. “There are a select few that are very loud, and for whatever reason have the ears of the legislators,” Shaltry said.

When a major book banning law passed in 2024, people were writing and calling in to the governor. There was a wave of library supporters calling to protest the ban. But laws are being passed anyway.

Shaltry believes that an imbalance of power in Idaho’s state legislature is the reason why bills continue to pass. Republicans dominate the house, making it more difficult to combat their legislation. Furthermore, Shaltry has found that efforts to find a middle ground have been unsuccessful.

“I think that there are some really reasonable legislators that feel like, ‘Fine, I’ll vote yes for this bill in hopes that you’ll vote the way that I’d like you for mine.’ But it’s not working like that. They’re wanting to see a compromise, and it’s not happening,” Shaltry said.

To Mejía’s point about communication, Shaltry cited her exclusion from legislative decisions as a reason for issues in the past. She has been completely left out of library budget conversations and has to fight to be heard in the statehouse. In other states, those fighting for the library tend to be underrepresented or not part of the conversation.<sup>26</sup>

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Kate McCann is a Vermont state representative who has helped create the state’s protective legislation. She believes that misinformation circulation on media platforms is helping generate support for book banning politicians.

“There’s just this engine somewhere working the false narrative about what’s in these books. You reading a book about someone who is gay is not going to make you gay. It’s just that’s not how it works. But there’s a lot of fear, false narratives and fear [in media]” McCann said.<sup>27</sup>

Social media is a particular concern. People are more likely than ever to get their news from social media. Social media is known to drive misinformation, especially with the rise of content created with Artificial Intelligence (AI). TikTok, Facebook and Instagram are among the worst culprits of perpetuating false facts. Still, in 2024, adults under the age of 30 trusted social media just as much as national news outlets.<sup>28, 29</sup> As misinformation regarding book content circulates, it generates more support for book banning legislation and politicians pushing for it.

In an interview with NPR, Cindy Hohl, the president of the American Library Association, said, “When we look at well-meaning patrons, constituents and residents, and they are making decisions based on misinformation, it is the role of the library and the librarian to help set the record straight.”<sup>30</sup>

## Who Reads, Anyway?

Book bans are not the only threat to modern libraries. Over the last several years, libraries have been up against challenges like defunding efforts and a general lack of community engagement. These underlying issues make book bans more impactful, and libraries more susceptible to folding under the pressure.

In a 2025 executive order, President Trump called for the elimination of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). This was part of the initiative to cut “unnecessary” government spending. The IMLS is the main source of federal funding for museums and libraries. It is the only agency that supports libraries on a federal level. Their budget is roughly \$290 million, making it a crucial contributor to public libraries in particular.

Soon after the order was issued, the entire staff of the IMLS was put on administrative leave, beginning the process of eliminating the agency as a whole. Without funding and support from the IMLS, libraries across the country will no longer be able to provide crucial library services and programs. The American Library Association (ALA) released a statement expressing concern about the inevitable effects of the loss.

“By eliminating the only federal agency dedicated to funding library services, the Trump administration’s executive order is cutting off at the knees the most beloved and trusted of American institutions and the staff and services they offer,” the statement read.

The ALA listed library services that will be on the chopping block, including early development reading classes, internet access, and employment assistance programs.<sup>1,2</sup>

There have also been defunding efforts on the state level. In 2024, state library funding fell 9.2%, despite increased spending. Collection funding fell 4.3%, following a downward trend since 2020.

Budget cuts are directly related to book bans in some cases. In 2023, Missouri cut \$4.5 million from its state library budget. This was seemingly in response to an ACLU lawsuit challenging Missouri’s book banning legislation. Missouri librarians took it as an attempt to weaken libraries amidst controversy. In Texas, Senate Bill 1601 was passed in 2023. The law states that libraries that provide inappropriate materials or host drag shows will have their state funding cut.<sup>3</sup>

“It’s kind of painted libraries and librarians in general, with sort of a tar brush, so that now we’re dealing with things like millage renewals and funding issues just because of the controversy, you know, hesitating to even fund libraries,” Lynette Mejía said.

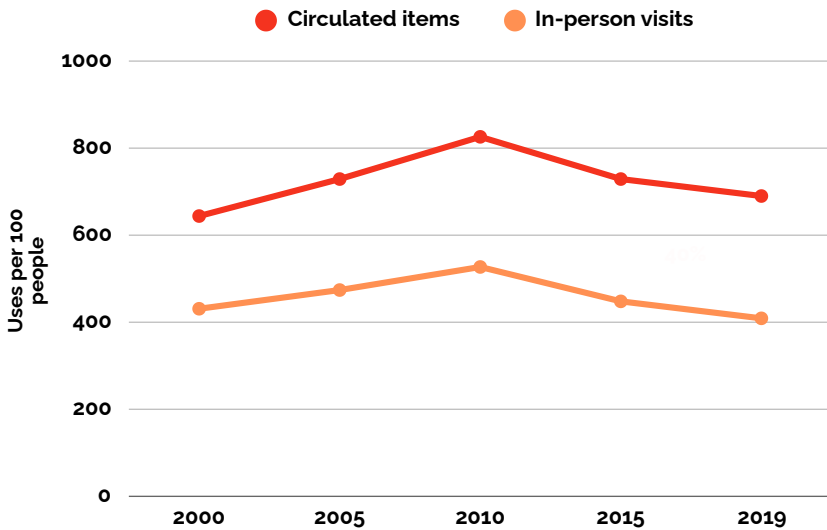
Lee Joyce is on the board of trustees for Bedford Public Library in Bedford, New Hampshire. One of her roles is advocating for library funding in town council meetings. In 2024, the library was denied funding for necessary staff building.

“I think that the library is considered an optional thing. You know, it’s, ‘The library? Oh, they can make do.’” Joyce said that the board of trustees has to be persuasive and persistent if they want to receive adequate funding.

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With rampant book bans and budget cuts, libraries are clearly not being valued as important societal institutions. But should they be?

## Public Library Use (2000-2019)



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In the digital age, books are no longer the center of our society. As discussed in the previous chapter, book readership has declined over the last decade, particularly among young people. Library engagement has been falling steadily since 2010. Across America, both in-person visits have dropped roughly 25% from 2010 to 2019.

Additionally, public libraries struggle to compete with bookstore giants like Amazon. In 2021, Amazon stopped selling thousands of its published E-books to libraries, furthering its monopoly over books. In one year, Amazon generates over \$16 billion in book sales.<sup>5,6</sup>

Many libraries took a major hit with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, some libraries have yet to make a full recovery of engagement. Huda Shaltry attested the impact of COVID-19 in the Boise Public Library.

“Before the pandemic, we were seeing very heavy use in many neighborhoods of the branches. Then the pandemic hit and

we shut down for a short time, maybe four to six weeks,” Shaltry explained. “We went to a curbside service. People would come pick up books, but they wouldn’t come into the buildings... We were serving people that had a certain need. But then when we reopened, it took a little while for people to start coming back to visit the library.”



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

The children's section of South Burlington Public Library.

Kelly Kendall, the children's librarian at South Burlington Public Library in South Burlington, Vermont, said that library events have been slow to recover from COVID-19. "People crept out very cautiously for things like that," Kendall said.

"COVID was very hard," said Victoria Tibbits, adult services librarian and assistant library director at Essex Free Library in Essex, Vermont. "We struggled. We wanted to be creative around how we could still offer services." During the pandemic, Essex Free Library implemented a "grab-and-go" system for retrieving library books. People can call or email to request a book, and pick it up from the library with their name on it. This offering was so successful that they decided to continue it post-COVID. In a small library like Essex Free Library, it was especially important to get creative during the pandemic.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

The book pickup station at Essex Free Library.

Libraries are specifically struggling to reach a teen demographic. Shaltry said that teen engagement in the library has fluctuated over time, and they are currently struggling to reach this age group. Kids once relied on the library for internet access, but the world is evolving.

“Here, the school district gives them all a Chromebook, and now that they’ve got devices at home, they’re not coming into the library to play games on the computer and things like that. They’re still using us, but just so differently, and definitely not like that teen hangout space,” Shaltry said.

Shaltry worries that the false rhetoric around libraries, like the rumor that they provide pornographic material, is contributing to a downturn in engagement.

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It is easy to dismiss libraries in this day and age, especially for people who do not use the library themselves. People see the world going in a digital direction, and assume that libraries are becoming obsolete. But threats to libraries are threats to one of the cornerstones of the American society and community. The role of libraries in American democracy cannot be overlooked. Public

libraries in particular are a manifestation of educational freedom, giving all members of society access to information. They are one of the few spaces where all are welcome, symbolizing an equal and inclusive society.

Intellectual freedom is woven into the fabric of library policy. In 1939, the ALA created the Library Bill of Rights, which is still upheld today. It acts as a guide for both public and school libraries. Although libraries are not required to affiliate with the ALA, it is the general precedent for library culture and values.

The Library Bill of Rights lists states: “Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation...A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.” In 2019, an amendment added the right to privacy. The final policy is: “All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.”<sup>77</sup>

As the efforts to weaken libraries grow stronger, it is crucial that communities reevaluate their priorities and protect their libraries.



*Photos by Catherine O'Donnell*

Signs hanging in Essex Free Library (left) and South Burlington Public Library (right).

## Beyond Books

People tend to be unaware of the wide variety of library offerings that make them such a valuable asset to a community.

Michael Colford, the director of Boston Public Library, said that marketing the library is extremely important for engagement. “I see one of the biggest challenges is getting the information to people of the services we provide. So many people think of libraries as ‘That’s where you go to get books,’” Colford said.

Libraries offer a wide variety of community building events and educational programs. They are one of the key “third spaces,” or free places to gather, in a community. Libraries are also inherently all-welcoming, making them an inclusive space for marginalized groups. People of all races, abilities, economic classes, sexual orientations and gender identities are welcome in the library.

Mejía, executive director of Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship, said that library programs offer crucial resources and support for community members. Despite the general decline in engagement, people are still relying on libraries in many ways. “You go in to any public library...you see so many people taking advantage of all the things that libraries have to offer – computer access that not everyone has the privilege of having at home, help finding jobs, job training, maker spaces, access to 3D printers, and things that are super expensive, that are kind of hard to get on a personal level,” Mejía said.

“The library is not just an access point for information, though it is, it’s a community hub. It’s a place where people from all walks of life can come together, can partake in and find things that they need.”<sup>8</sup>

## Programs & Community Enrichment

Most public libraries offer programs and events that benefit the community in a variety of ways. Programming is a huge part of a library’s role, and a major focus among librarians in their effort to drive engagement and positively contribute to the community.

These programs range from adult education classes to after-school craft sessions.

Lee Joyce has witnessed an expansion of library offerings over time. “When I was a kid, I don’t remember there being any programming at the library. You just went to the library. [Programs] are not part of the job description, but I think it’s an important part of keeping it viable for people to want to put their tax dollars into good things,” Joyce said.<sup>9</sup>

Presumably, the prioritization of programming and events can be partially attributed to the growth of digital media and the internet over the past several decades. Libraries have had to strategically evolve to remain relevant, and many have done this successfully.

Michael Colford explained his library’s evolution and the shifted focus on library programs.

“I’ve been with the Boston Public Library for 20 years, and over that time, we’ve definitely seen a very strong shift expanding beyond traditional uses, like people getting books and people



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

The announcement board at South Burlington Library, where events and programs are highlighted.

getting information, towards more workforce development oriented, social service oriented, literacy and ESOL oriented uses. So a lot more human services,” Colford said. “We always did a little bit of that, but it’s really gotten much more prevalent, much more of a priority.”

ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes are a popular service at the Boston Public Library. The library also offers resources to help immigrants get United States citizenship. Colford explained that immigrants typically view the library as a safe space. “A lot of times, they distrust government institutions, but there’s a high level of trust with the library, so they tend to come to the library and they’re looking for these services, like ESOL services, help with computers, help with filling out forms to get jobs,” Colford said.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

An adult computer class in the South Burlington Public Library Digital Lab.

Professional development services include one-on-one resume review, interview training, and career counseling events. Boston Public Library also offers after-school tutoring programs for students. Classes that foster professional and educational advancement are offered at libraries across the country.

The Public Library Association (PLA) is a division of the

ALA, which supports library workers through professional development and educational opportunities. There are roughly 9,000 PLA members across America. After the pandemic, the PLA began encouraging librarians to build up their career-development programs. In the “Workforce Development” section of the ALA website, it says, “Millions of people are seeking opportunities to build skills, find and improve job prospects, and prepare for in-demand careers.”<sup>10</sup>

In 2021, the ALA introduced the Public Libraries: Partners in Workforce Development webinar series. This gave librarians the tools to deliver practical career services to their communities.<sup>11</sup>

Although programs are increasingly relevant, Colford said that book collections remain a primary draw for library patrons. “I would say that’s still probably the bulk of what we do. But the other services that I mentioned have certainly grown quite a bit, it’s probably fifty-fifty,” Colford said.

The city of Boston recently moved the library from its arts and culture cabinet to the human services cabinet.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

A library patron using a computer at Essex Free Library.

At Boise Public Library, Huda Shaltry has also seen an expansion of library uses over time. The library has study and meeting rooms that are constantly in use. Shaltry said that remote companies without office space frequently do their staff meetings in the library. People who work from home also use these workspaces. Shaltry attributes these library uses to the COVID, which made remote work more of the norm.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

The community room at South Burlington Public Library. Companies and clubs reserve the room for meetings.

Shaltry emphasized the fact that many people in their community do not have internet access. People make assumptions that everyone has computers and the internet, but the library is still actively relied upon for these resources. Her branch of the Boise Public Library has a large homeless population. The library is a crucial support system for this demographic.<sup>12</sup>

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Library programming is not always for educational or for professional advancement, oftentimes it is fun and community building. Libraries host community events from club meetings to

concerts. Storytime for children is a popular library event. Victoria Tibbits, the adult services librarian and assistant library director at Essex Free Library, said that children's events typically draw the largest crowds. There are multiple storytime sessions throughout the week, sometimes "musical storytime." Tibbits said that these events are always well attended by parents looking for family events in the community.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Victoria Tibbits in Essex Free Library.

Children's storytime is also popular at South Burlington Public Library. Kelly Kendall said that there is a consistently good turnout, with about 80 attendees at each week's event. "That's a really huge part of where we are in the community," Kendall said.

Essex Free Library also offers a summer reading program, where children record the books they read for the chance to win a prize. Tibbits said that programs like these boost kids' excitement for reading.

One of Essex Free Library's most popular children's events is called "Read to Chewy." Kids read children's books to Chewy, a golden retriever therapy dog. The event is organized by Therapy Dogs of Vermont, a non-profit organization that trains therapy

dogs and brings them to places like hospitals and libraries. Chewy, an excellent listener, and makes the children's library experience calming and fun.<sup>13</sup>



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Chewy the dog with his owner Cindy Turcotte in the children's section of Essex Free Library.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Community events are not just for kids. Essex Free Library has an adult book club, a knitting club, board game nights,

and trivia nights. With these events, Tibbits said that the library is trying to reach a young adult demographic (where they see their biggest gap in engagement). Turnouts tend to be unpredictable, with some events drawing large crowds and others left a bit empty.

Events depend on a library's funding and resources. South Burlington Public Library was newly built in 2021. It is a large, modern space that can host a variety of events. In their small auditorium, they host concerts, movie screenings, community meetings, and more.<sup>14</sup>



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Twangtown Paramours, an acoustic singing duo, perform for local seniors in the South Burlington Public Library auditorium.

Because libraries are community centers, some events are dedicated to hometown celebration. Barbara Ball is the director of Windsor Public Library in Windsor, Vermont. She said that the library plays a big role in honoring the town's history. Built in 1902, the Windsor Public Library represents the history and community of this small Vermont town. When Windsor celebrated its 250th anniversary, the library received grant funding to organize events. They created a book highlighting 250 Windsor natives telling their stories. They hosted a storytelling and poetry writing class, where residents could share and connect with each other. Ball said that the overall goal was bringing the community together.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Windsor Public Library.

## The Third Space

A “third space” is somewhere that is not school, work, or home. It is a neutral place, designed for social interaction, and does not require people to spend money. These are places like parks, community centers and libraries.

There is more demand for third spaces these days, especially among younger generations. For people who have grown up with social media, there is a false sense of connection between friends. We have “digital third spaces,” which have ineffectively replaced in-person ones. In 2023, people between the ages of 16 and 23 were reported to feel lonelier than any other age group. Gen Z spends more time on smartphones and social media than any generation before them. The connection between loneliness and digital media usage is clear.<sup>15</sup>

The desire for the third space could be driving Gen Z library engagement. A 2023 ALA report found that over 50% of Gen Z and millennials visited a physical library within the previous 12 months. Gen Z is more likely to visit the library than generations before them.



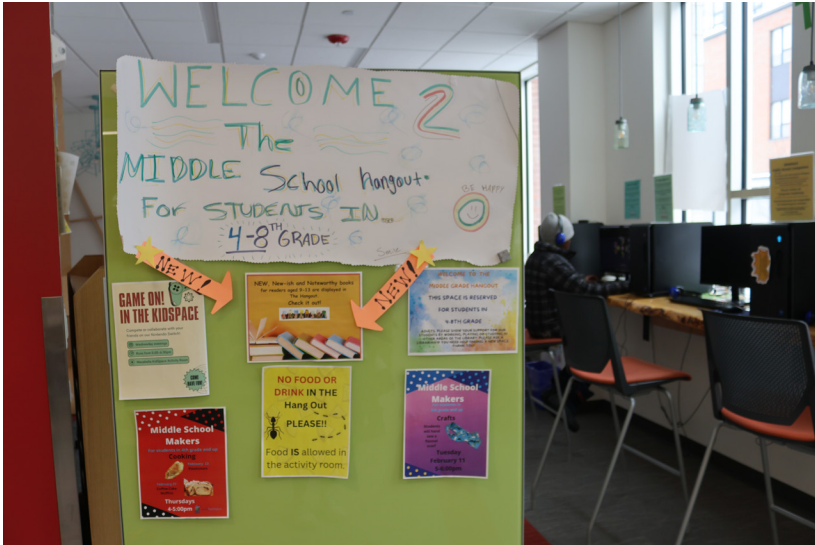
*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Kids playing computer games in “The Middle School Hangout” of South Burlington Public Library.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

A kids chess club meeting in the children’s section of South Burlington Public Library.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

The "Middle School Hangout" activity board at South Burlington Public Library.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Childrens crafts hanging in the craft room at South Burlington Public Library.

Of the percentage of Gen Z and millennials who visit the library, 43% do not identify themselves as readers. Therefore, they are drawn to the library for something besides books, whether that is a library program or for the desire for socializing in a third-space.<sup>16, 17, 18</sup>

Tibbits said that because public libraries connect communities, they are more important than ever. “Third spaces are really disappearing in this country, and the library is holding that space for people,” Tibbits said. “It’s not work. It’s not home. Nobody’s expecting you to spend any money to hang out here. The resources are free to use while you’re here in the building, and if you have a library card, they’re free to borrow.”<sup>19</sup>



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Kelly Kendall in the children's section of South Burlington Public Library.

At South Burlington Public Library, Kelly Kendall has increasingly seen older kids use the library as a third space. There is a growing number of middle schoolers who come to the library after school, using it as a hang-out space.<sup>20</sup>

## Inclusivity

As stated in the library bill of rights, libraries are spaces where everyone is welcome. By nature, libraries foster diversity and inclusivity, offering materials and events that cater to all demographics in the community.

“In an urban public library, of course, we are also open to everyone,” Colford said. “Being free to all is our core value. In the past, that has meant free, as in, you don’t have to pay any money. And that’s still true. But the all part is what we are really leaning into... So what that means is, you get people with very challenging circumstances. They’re struggling with housing insecurity, they might be struggling with mental illness, they might be dealing with addiction, but they are all welcome to come to the library and use our services.”

Sometimes, the mixing of people can cause tense situations. People struggling with mental illness, for example, may be triggered by certain behaviors or people in the library. Or, others are put off by certain behaviors of other library patrons. Verbal altercations have occurred, and Colford said this happens in urban libraries in particular. Librarians have to work to maintain a pleasant atmosphere, and keep themselves and their patrons safe.

“Some people don’t want to share space with all different kinds of people, but that’s exactly what a library is. Libraries are for all. We have materials and programs for many different types of populations, and some people may not feel comfortable with some of those,” Colford said. Boston Public Library stays true to their policy of inclusivity and representation, even if some community members disapprove. He referenced Drag Queen Story Hour as a particularly controversial event.<sup>21</sup>

Drag Queen Story Hour, an organization that brings drag queens to libraries to read books to kids, was founded in 2015. Since then, it has grown very popular across the country. Supporters of Drag Queen Story Hour see it as a fun and entertaining event where kids learn lessons of empathy and inclusion. However, the events have been a key topic in book banning conversations. Conservatives have fixated on Drag Queen Story Hour, calling it “child

grooming.” Tennessee and Montana have explicitly outlawed drag performances on public property or in front of children.<sup>22, 23</sup>

Nevertheless, Boston Public Library continues to host Drag Queen Story Hour to great success.

In Vermont, Windsor Public Library also hosts Drag Queen Story Hour. In 2024, drag queens Emoji Nightmare and Katniss Everqueer performed for a packed room of parents with young children. The kids were enthralled with the performance, listening intently to the stories and giggling at every joke. The books were mostly about LGBTQ acceptance, including *Red: A Crayon’s Story* by Michael Hall. The book is about a blue crayon that is mistakenly labelled red, and must learn to accept its true identity. The book is banned in several school districts.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Emoji Nightmare (left) and Katniss Everqueer (right) performing at Windsor Public Library's Drag Queen Story Hour.

Emoji Nightmare, otherwise known as Justin Marsh, said that they frequently read banned books in the story hours. “To read these books that are deemed as controversial and even like saying it to the crowd...For parents to see the kinds of things that are on the line of being taken away...I think it really highlights why

banned books are important, because these are stories that should be they should be told,” Marsh said.

To close the show, Emoji and Katniss sang a song to the tune of “Wheels on the Bus,” with lyrics about drag queens. “The shoulders on the drag queen go shimmy shimmy shimmy / the hair on the drag queen goes up up up / the cheeks on the drag queen go blush blush blush.” The kids sang along gleefully.



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Emoji Nightmare and Katniss Everqueer performing at Windsor Public Library's Drag Queen Story Hour.

While Drag Queen Story Hours are generally well received in Vermont, there are some outspoken protestors. In 2024, there was an organized protest in Saint Johnsbury, Vermont. Outside the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, people held signs that read “Protect our children” and “Education not indoctrination.”<sup>24</sup>

Marsh feels that the 2024 election of Donald Trump will fuel this kind of backlash. “I do feel like people are a little emboldened now, and they feel protected in their hatred...because we have someone who is a perpetrator of harm as our top elected official in this country. But we also always see so much love and so much willingness to combat that. We're expecting a lovely rainbow wall

to sort of block out any visible hatred towards us and towards people like us,” Marsh said.<sup>25</sup>

Barbara Ball, the Windsor Public Librarian, is passionate about maintaining inclusive events like Drag Queen Story Hour in the library.

“I think it’s more important than ever, so that people can see themselves in others and see themselves in what the library has, both the library events and library resources. Especially right now, where there are national pushes for us all to be the same and to conform. It’s really great that we can show the diversity of our communities,” Ball said.<sup>26</sup>



*Photo by Catherine O'Donnell*

Books in the Windsor Public Library children's section that celebrate diversity.

## Getting With the Times

In their effort to keep up with the modern age, libraries have been evolving on the digital front. Like the expansion of library offerings and resources, keeping up with modern technology is a crucial part of maintaining relevance. This means everything from digitizing collections to having an updated website.

## Digital Collections

Digital databases have become a major resource for libraries, and make materials easier to access. In 2014, major book publishers began selling e-books directly to libraries. Since then, digital collections across America have expanded and become a primary way people use libraries.<sup>27, 28</sup> According to an ALA report, digital library borrowing increased 34% from 2019 to 2023. In 2020, roughly 428 million electronic items were borrowed from public libraries. By 2024, this number has risen to 739 million digital checkouts, breaking the record of any previous year.<sup>29, 30</sup>

Digital lending has increased with the introduction of library mobile apps. Libby and Sora are free apps that provide users with access to e-books and audiobooks from public and school libraries. Kanopy allows users to stream video content from their library. By connecting with these apps, libraries make digital lending easier and more efficient. In 2024, over 9.1 million people downloaded the Libby app. Kanopy's total streaming minutes increased 18% from the previous year. With these innovations, digital library collections are continuing to develop.<sup>31</sup>

## Social Media

Social media has become a center of social interaction, connecting people in their local communities and beyond. The average adult spends over two hours on social media per day, and the average teenager spends over four hours. The popularity of social media has made it an important part of marketing, and libraries have been making efforts to utilize it. As of 2019, over 70% of libraries were using social media in some capacity, typically for marketing and announcements. However, only 30% of librarians post daily on their social media accounts. Reaching the correct audiences can be a challenge for libraries, and increased social media use is a good strategy.<sup>32, 33</sup>

Brandi O'Kelley is the visual arts specialist for Long Beach Public Library in Long Beach, California. She thinks that social media is the future for library outreach.

“Libraries are one of those places that have adapted quickly and successfully to the change of technology. So adding in social media to that rotation wouldn’t be unexpected. A lot of people still aren’t aware of all the resources their public library provides, and elevating that messaging on social media is the best way to get the word out to people who haven’t visited their library in years,” O’Kelley said.

Long Beach Public Library has been prioritizing social media since 2017. O’Kelley’s predecessor understood the cultural significance of social media and recognized its benefits for the library. The primary focus is their Instagram account, which has over 26,000 followers. Through Instagram posts, O’Kelley promotes library events and encourages community engagement. Big, urban public libraries typically have large followings on social media, and are able to put resources toward digital marketing. But not every library has the money for a marketing department.

“Librarians are expected to wear many different hats, and while they excel at this, I don’t necessarily think it’s fair to them. Marketing, communications, social media, graphic design, advertising, and [public relations] are all their own separate careers,” O’Kelley said.

“I don’t think librarians study how to create fliers or film videos for social media, you know? While a lot of librarians enjoy these types of tasks, their plates are so full with the daily work of librarianship that it leaves very little time for marketing their programs and services.”

O’Kelley feels grateful that the Long Beach Public Library can support a marketing staff because the benefits are so substantial. In 2024, O’Kelley posted an Instagram reel that went viral, receiving over 620,000 likes. In the video, one of the librarians is giving a tour of the library, using typical Gen Z slang to describe different features. The funny video earned the library Instagram over 10,000 new followers. The boost in social media engagement has spread awareness of the Long Beach Public Library features and services.<sup>34, 35</sup>



*Photos courtesy of Brandi O’Kelley*

The viral video on the Long Beach Public Library Instagram page.

O’Kelley said that the video was targeted toward Gen Z for a reason. “It’s historically difficult for libraries to engage our younger patrons. That’s not to say that young people don’t use the library, because they definitely do. A lot of people just have an antiquated idea of libraries, that they’re quiet, sterile environments filled with old, dusty books,” O’Kelley said.

“But we’re so far from that point. Libraries really have everything. We provide so many great resources to help teens and young people excel, from homework help, prep for tests, access to laptops and wifi, and even just a place for them to hang out in a safe space, all for free.”

O’Kelley was concerned when she discovered that only 5% of their social media following was from people under the age of 25. With the viral video, she was specifically trying to reach a Gen Z audience.

O’Kelley believes that social media is necessary for the future of libraries. While most libraries have social media, it needs to

become more of a priority. Even small libraries without marketing teams can put more emphasis on their social media presences. It is the most effective way to market library events, build engagement and strengthen connection with communities.<sup>36</sup>

## Fighting for the Future

After several years, those directly involved in defending books are feeling a range of emotions. It has been a long, hard effort and books have been losing. Some feel that the end is nowhere in sight, while others maintain hope for the future.

Huda Shaltry feels that book bans are a sign of a bigger societal shift, and is concerned about the ability to reverse the current trend.

“If you don’t have access to central district health or like information about things like that, how does that make us any different than any other sort of fascist state dictator?” Shaltry said. “It is dictatorship 101, having mistrust with your educators, library workers and medical professionals and only trusting politicians. It never works. I wish I’d never read a dystopian book in my life, because this is exactly how it starts, and it happens quietly and slowly.”

Ellen Hopkins is wary of the current political environment boosting book banning efforts. “Honestly, I’m a little frightened for this country. I’m worried for my grandchildren, you know. I don’t want to see [kids] raised where the First Amendment is out the door, and we’re headed that way. These are protections that we

believed would be ours forever, and they are dismantling them one by one,” Hopkins said.

“I’m telling all my friends, I would collect hard copies of the books you love and find a place to keep them, because I think some of them are going to be hard to find. Collect all my books. They might be worth a lot of money.”<sup>1</sup>

The current wave of book banning is discouraging, but many feel strong in the fight against it. Lynette Mejía is hopeful that this is just a phase of history. “It felt like, especially at the beginning, that this was just a new political fad among people who were looking for these issues to kind of fight out. Unfortunately, it’s lasted five years now... It’s hard to say, but I really hope that it turns out to be something that, in the long run, they just abandon for some other topic and move on,” Mejía said.

Mejía lives in Louisiana, which has a strong population pushing to ban books. In states like these, those fighting for books must stay strong in their fight because the opposition is so forceful. “In places like New York or Chicago, there’s a lot of support for books. They’ve had anti-book ban legislation, but we really are on the front lines here in the South. So we lose a lot, I’m not going to lie, and that’s incredibly demoralizing and discouraging,” Mejía said.

“But I think we all feel that, discouraging or not, we will continue on. We will fight and fight and fight. And when we do win, when we do claw back some of this ground that we’ve lost. We kind of ride those highs.”

Shaltry is determined not to back down no matter how challenging it becomes. “If I don’t have hope, then then what?” Shaltry said. “Part of that tactic is wearing people down. And I won’t let them. I’ll still fight for books.” Shaltry and other librarians lean on support from fellow library workers.

“It’s not a hard group to fight for,” Shaltry said.<sup>2</sup>

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Libraries are not going away anytime soon, and neither are the topics targeted in banned books. The fight for the freedom to read is strong, with organizations, legislators and community mem-

bers doing all they can to protect libraries. It is unclear if the end is in sight, or if banning legislation will be reversed anytime soon. But every effort for the freedom to read goes a long way, fueling the resistance to censorship.

## Organizations

Across America, there are several organizations involved in both sides of the book ban controversy. Book banning organizations like Moms for Liberty, Citizens for a New Louisiana and Parents' Rights in Education have built major followings, but so have organizations for the freedom to read. The American Library Association (ALA) and PEN America are leading the charge in book ban research, keeping tabs of challenges and restrictive legislation across America. These organizations not only provide book ban data, they provide librarians and communities with opportunities to take action. On the PEN America website, there are outlets to send letters to elected officials, report book challenges, and learn how to create book challenge framework in your community.<sup>3</sup>

In 2022, the ALA, the largest library association in the world, launched their Unite Against Book Bans campaign. It is based on spreading true information about book bans and teaching communities how to fight back. Over 200 groups across America have partnered with the campaign since its inception. They host events that educate communities on book bans. Their website provides an "action toolkit" with steps for fighting back on a local level. They encourage people to attend school board meetings, talk to local and state elected officials, create petitions and utilize media to inform the public.

The ALA also organizes nationwide events, like the 2024 Freedom to Read Day of Action. Libraries across 35 states organized events that highlight their diverse collections. These kinds of campaigns and events bolster the voices of those fighting for books and encourage the involvement of libraries across the country.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Colford is the board director of the Public Library Association (PLA), an offshoot of the ALA. The PLA has made book banning more of a priority in recent years, putting more re-

sources into assisting public libraries with challenges. They provide public librarians with guidelines for speaking with the press, responding to challenges in their library and developing challenge policy.<sup>5</sup>

“The PLA and ALA actively try to work on legislation to keep laws going into cities and towns that give control of content in libraries to city officials...and make sure that freedom to read bills are being developed in various cities and states,” Coldford said. “Also helping people understand what a certain proposed law means and how it could affect them, or something as simple as just reminding everyone to vote...”

• • •

Most freedom to read organizations are based out of one state, focusing their efforts more locally. Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship (LCAC) is a volunteer organization dedicated to fighting for freedom of speech and the right to read. They have chapters in seven of Louisiana’s parishes (or counties).

Lynette Mejía is the co-founder and executive director of LCAC. Before the LCAC, Mejía first formed Lafayette Citizens Against Censorship, based in Lafayette, Louisiana. The attacks on the Lafayette Public Library system had been under attack since 2018, when Michael Lunsford founded Citizens for a New Louisiana (CFNL). As outlined in chapter three, Lunsford first got the Lafayette Public Library defunded, and built public outrage regarding the library’s Drag Queen Story Hour. Over the next few years, CFNL went on a book challenging crusade, and advocated for book banning legislation. In 2021, Mejía formed Lafayette Citizens Against Censorship with Melanie Brevis. Their goal was to spread awareness of the attacks on the library and build support locally.

Over the years, book banning issues ramped up across Louisiana. Mejía and Brevis came in contact with Amanda Jones, a Louisiana librarian whose fight for books made national headlines. The three decided to form a statewide group in order to share resources, policies and tips with as many librarians as possible. They formed LCAC in 2023.<sup>6,7</sup>

“Even here in Lafayette, where we’ve had so much contro-

versy, we still run into people who have never heard about what's going on in the public library. So it's still that constant effort for outreach and getting the information out. Most people, when they find out what's happening in their public library, are very much against it. They're outraged. So it's just getting that knowledge out there," Mejía said.

During the legislative session, LCAC works with legislators and monitors the bills being introduced. In 2024, nine anti-library bills were filed, which meant LCAC had their work cut out for them. After researching the issues, they reached out to elected officials and advocated for the library perspective. LCAC members testified at the capitol. They utilized social media and email campaigns to spread the word.

"We made a form so that people could just really easily find their legislator, fill out a form saying they're against this bill, and send it on. I think we have almost 45,000 emails sent all together through the legislative session," Mejía said. "Legislators told us it was really helpful, because they could see how their constituents felt about these different bills, and it influenced how they voted in some cases."

Mejía said that Lunsford and CFNL are the biggest opponents of the LCAC efforts. Lunsford has personally targeted Mejía, and once posted a description of her car on the CFNL website. This has made Mejía nervous for her safety.

Of the nine anti-library bills introduced in 2023, LCAC defeated seven. Of the two that passed, the LCAC had contributed to making it less severe. This was a huge win for the organization.

"We were super excited about that, especially considering the political climate in Louisiana these days, and the fact that the governor himself ran on this issue. We were very, very proud of the work that we did in the legislature that year," Mejía said.

LCAC collaborates with the National Coalition Against Censorship, a New York based alliance of over 50 organizations. Once a month, there are virtual seminars where organizations share resources and information about funding, outreach and legal issues. Mejía feels encouraged by the amount of people fighting for books across the country.<sup>8</sup>

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Texas FReadom Fighters is another state organization fighting for the freedom to read. It was founded by librarians Carolyn Foote and Becky Calzada in 2021. Texas is one of the hotspots of book banning, so the FReadom Fighters do a lot of work for libraries across the state. They are one of the most prominent and vocal groups advocating for book access.

The FReadom Fighters provide resources and coaching to librarians who are dealing with book challenges or community backlash. They also help community members and students get involved, giving them guidelines for participating in school board meetings, reaching out to politicians, etc.

FReadom Fighters was founded in response to Texas Representative Matt Krause targeting 850 books for removal from libraries and school curriculums. Of those 850 titles, 62% had LGBTQ topics, 14% discussed race and racism, and 8% discussed sex.<sup>9</sup> Krause sent the list of books to libraries across the state, ordering that they be removed. Even though Krause technically did not have the power to ban the books, librarians felt the pressure to remove them anyway.

Foote and Calzada, both Texas school librarians, decided the issue needed more attention. Using their network of Texas educators, they encouraged people to tweet about a controversial or diverse book that was meaningful to them. People used the hashtag, #txlege, the hashtag also used for the Texas legislature. There were over 13,000 tweets in the first day. The virality encouraged Foote and Calzada to form FReadom Fighters.

“Part of the reason why it was embraced so much is because people felt so deflated by what was happening and scared to speak up. So we were kind of seen as speaking up on behalf of others and on behalf of librarians in Texas,” Foote said. “Despite how it comes out in the election, Texas kind of votes [split]. So there’s substantial parts of the state that support the freedom to read. We’ve had pretty wide support from the public.”<sup>10</sup>

Calzada said that FReadom Fighters came before most free-

dom to read organizations in Texas, which is why it immediately made waves. “I think what it showed us is that people are supportive and believe in the power of books. It showed us that people were hungry to take action, but they just didn’t know what to do,” Calzada said.



*Photo courtesy of Carolyn Foote*

Carolyn Foote (left) and Becky Calzada (right) at the 2024 Texas Computer Education Association conference.

FReadom Fighters has continued to utilize social media to get attention and awareness of their cause. Every Friday, they post an action for people to take, such as sending a note to their local school board about the importance of banned books. Even these small actions are important because they boost community awareness, which is the most important tool in the fight for books.<sup>11</sup>

In 2022, the FReadom Fighters received the American Association of School Libraries’ Intellectual Freedom Award. The American Association of School Libraries (AASL) is a division of the ALA, which provides professional development and resources for school librarians and advocates for their legal protections. In

2024, Calzada was elected president of the AASL.<sup>12</sup>

Foote and Calzada are passionate and unwavering in their fight for Texas libraries. They believe that education and American culture as a whole are on the line.

“I think it’s not even just about libraries. I think it’s more about trying to destroy public education. So I think the library is just one piece of it,” Calzada said.

“There’s history on this. It is about the containment of ideas...A lot of the books that are being removed have LGBTQ content. They’re about reproductive health. They are about marginalized people, Black people, people of color, Indigenous people. Their history is not allowed to be shared. So when you think about these things, I mean, there’s an agenda...It’s because public education is what’s helping people to advance.”

Calzada referenced the fact that Texas banned the teaching of *The 1619 Project*, a book by Nikole Hannah-Jones that reframes Black history and lays the groundwork for critical race theory. It was originally published in *The New York Times* in 2019.<sup>13</sup>

“There are domino effects to these decisions that have implications for setting us back,” Calzada said.

## Legal Progress

Book banning legislation sweeps away books in high numbers. To combat these efforts, some state legislators have been taking legal action in support of the freedom to read. When passed, these laws enforce library protections and bar book banning efforts on the state level.

New Jersey, California, Illinois, Maryland, Vermont, Minnesota and Washington have all passed protective legislation. In 2023, Illinois became the first state to outlaw book bans. The law states that libraries that receive state funding must comply with the Library Bill of Rights, and therefore provide inclusive materials and not remove books based on viewpoint or partisan disapproval.<sup>14</sup>

Other states have followed suit. New Jersey passed the “Freedom to Read Act” in 2024. It states that “boards of education

and governing boards of public libraries are prevented from censoring library material based on a disagreement with a viewpoint, idea, or concept, or solely because an individual finds certain content offensive...<sup>15</sup> Also in 2024, Minnesota passed Senate File 3567, with a section titled “Access to Library Materials and Rights Protected.” The law states that “a public library must not ban, remove, or otherwise restrict access to a book or other material based solely on its viewpoint or the messages, ideas, or opinions it conveys.”<sup>16</sup>

These laws, as well as other passed protective legislation, require the states to develop material selection policies and book challenge protocol. This is a big part of protecting libraries from controversy and lawsuits. Material selection policies prove that librarians are following the correct outlines for collection development. Having set guidelines for book challenges promotes communication with librarians and prevents the spread of misinformation.

Kate McCann is a Vermont state representative, and teaches mathematics at U-32 High School in Montpelier. She was intent upon establishing book ban policies in Vermont in order to protect librarians and teachers. “If a book is challenged in your school library and you don’t have a policy, it’s very easy for parents to bend the ear of the elected school board members,” McCann said.

McCann sponsored Senate Bill 220, or Act 150, which follows the basic outline of other freedom to read legislation. It states that public schools and libraries have to establish a clear policy for challenging and removing books, and that books can no longer be removed for discussing politics, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual health, race, religious views, etc. The bill became law in 2024.

The law was an edited version of previous proposed bills, one of which McCann had introduced. House Bill 806 would have restricted funding to libraries that ban books. The bill was based on an Illinois law that passed in 2024, which withholds funds from libraries that remove books based on “partisan disapproval.” McCann’s fellow legislators were concerned that this was unconstitutional and in violation of the right to petition. The law in Illinois has led to protests.<sup>17</sup>

“What they’re seeing in Illinois is some pushback, where folks certain libraries are and schools are foregoing state dollars in order to ban the books anyway. So it just isn’t really working out the way that I think Illinois wanted it to,” McCann said. It can be challenging to find the line between protecting libraries and infringing upon the rights of community members.<sup>18</sup>

As book ban concerns progress, protective legislation is increasingly being introduced and reworked. In 2025, 37 new freedom to read bills were introduced in 20 states. This legal progress is making a difference.<sup>19</sup>

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There have also been several lawsuits pushing back against book banning. In 2025, the five largest publishing companies in the United States sued the state of Idaho for unconstitutional book banning legislation. The publishers include Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan Publishers and Simon & Schuster. These companies have also sued Iowa and Florida for their book restrictions. The Authors Guild, the largest association of writers in the United States, have backed lawsuits as well. Banned authors like Ellen Hopkins have been plaintiffs in ACLU and PEN America lawsuits.<sup>20, 21</sup>

While many of these cases are ongoing, there have been significant wins. In 2024, PEN America won its case against a Florida school district, halting the removal of over 1,600 titles. These wins encourage further legal pushback against book bans.<sup>22</sup>

## Library Efforts

Individual libraries have made their own efforts to protect book access. Libraries across America have declared themselves “book sanctuaries.” In 2022, the Chicago Public Library declared Chicago a book sanctuary city, and became the first city to do so. All public library branches in Chicago provide access to banned books. This began the Book Sanctuary campaign, which provides libraries with materials and steps to become book sanctuaries.

While other cities like Hoboken, New Jersey have declared themselves book sanctuary cities, individual libraries can be sanctuaries as well. There are currently over 4,000 across America.<sup>23, 24</sup> Drawing attention to banned books is a powerful act of library resistance. Every year, the ALA promotes “Banned Books Week,” encouraging libraries to call attention to their books that are banned in other areas. At South Burlington Public Library in Vermont, they display banned books covered in paper, with the reason for the ban written on it. Librarian Kelly Kendall said this event opens the conversation of censorship and the importance of banned topics.<sup>25</sup>

• • •

There are also efforts being made on the digital front. E-books and digital collections open the possibilities for book sharing across state lines. The Digital Public Library of America has made banned books free to access through “The Banned Book Club” initiative. People in states with book bans can join the club and get a virtual library card. Their goal is to make the books “un-bannable.”<sup>26</sup>

In 2021, Brooklyn Public Library announced the Books Unbanned program, which grants free access to their digital collection to anyone in America, ages 13-21. Typically, only people in-state can get a library card. With Books Unbanned, people can access books that are banned in their state. The program has been successful, and was adopted by Boston Public Library, Los Angeles County Public Library, San Diego Public Library, and Seattle Public Library. Thousands of young people have open access to books that are banned in their area.<sup>27</sup>

Michael Colford said that Boston Public Library has provided library cards in every single state for people ages 13 through 26. In Texas, several thousand people have Boston’s Books Unbanned library card.

“As each person registers for the library card, we ask them to just put a sentence or two of why they feel this is important to them, or why they need this library card,” Colford explained. “And

the quotes we're getting from people are really quite powerful... They really want to be able to have this information, and they can't get at their own local school library. It's an important program, we're very proud to be part of it."

## Community Efforts

One does not have to be involved with their local library, school, or government to help protect book access in their community. As seen with Texas FReadom Fighters and LCAC, awareness goes a long way. Simply having conversations with people can create real change. "Once you explain the gray area about the red flagging and about some of these books being mischaracterized, a lot of times even people who are for book bans will stop and say, 'Wow, I didn't know it meant that,' Mejía said.<sup>28</sup>

"Part of this whole freedom to read movement is to just make people aware of what is being spurred on by a relatively small number of people, so that they can talk to people about it... Whether they agree or not, it still helps them to understand what the issue is," Colford said.<sup>29</sup>

Individuals can attend school or library board meetings and speak about protecting books. These meetings are typically where book challenges happen, so having book supporters present is important. People can reach out to local government officials and start petitions. Social media is a good way to spread the word about book bans, as well as ways to access banned books. People in states with heavy restrictions may not be aware of things like the Books Unbanned or the Digital Public Library of America. When people share these resources, they are helping to keep banned books alive.

• • •

Little Free Library is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2009. Through Little Free Library, volunteers build book exchange boxes to place in their communities. More than 120 million books have been shared in Little Free Libraries around the world. There are Little Free Libraries in all 50 states and in 91 countries.



*Photos by Catherine O'Donnell*

Little Free Libraries in town centers and front yards.

The expansion of book access has always been part of the Little Free Library mission statement. Amidst rising book bans, the organization has specifically emphasized providing access to banned books. On their website, “Championing diverse books” is listed as one of their missions.<sup>30</sup>

Greig Metzger, the executive director of Little Free Library, made a public statement that banned books are welcome in Little Free Libraries. They introduced a map feature on their website that highlights areas hit hardest by book bans, as well as the nearest Little Free Library. “The heart of our mission is to expand access to books, and we hope this map inspires you to provide access to the banned books that are meaningful to you,” Metzger said.<sup>31</sup>

Little Free Libraries are a primary example of regular people combatting censorship, one book at a time.

• • •

As long as people are distributing banned books and continuing the conversation, these books will be kept alive in one way or another. At such a crucial point in American history, those who care about books and libraries cannot lie idle. Silence is a surrender to censorship, which will have ripple effects across all areas of American society.

“It’s going to necessitate that more people not be apathetic,” Calzada said. “People need to get engaged – engaged at the local level, the state level and the national level to make change.”<sup>32</sup>

Most importantly, people must keep reading. Reading a banned book is an act of resistance, spreading the ideas that book bans so desperately want to suppress. Fostering empathy by engaging with diverse perspectives is the most important weapon in the fight for the right to read.

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# Notes

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## About the Author

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**Catherine O'Donnell** has always had creative passion. Just ask her parents, who were often scrubbing crayon artwork off the walls of her childhood home. It was not until she studied Media, Journalism and Digital Arts at Saint Michael's College that she learned how to hone these creative instincts to tell meaningful stories. She fell in love with writing, and is consistently empowered by amplifying quiet voices.

Catherine grew up in Easton, Massachusetts, but her heart has many homes. She spends each summer by the ocean in Marshfield, Massachusetts. She studied abroad in Florence, Italy, and now claims to have "Italian roots." At Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont, she found her best friends and had the time of her life.



Since 2020, controversy over library books and school curriculums has skyrocketed and grabbed national attention. Through legislation and community backlash, books that address critical race theory, sexuality, BIPOC experiences, and LGBTQ identities are being restricted across America.

In a country built on the freedom of speech, how is this allowed?

This exploration of the quiet impacts and intentions of book bans reveals the political battleground within American libraries, catching librarians in the crossfire.

It begs the question:

Is this an effort for censorship, or are books merely a political pawn?