



Censorship of Books in Public Schools and Libraries

WHITE PAPER SUMMARY

Books have been banned and burned since before the Christian Era. Some of the most controversial books in history are now regarded as classics, the Bible and works by Shakespeare among them. The reasons then and now are very much the same. Dictators and autocratic rulers believed their values were superior to others and used their power to enforce them.¹ Books are being banned in America's schools and libraries in record numbers, led largely by extremist lawmakers and activists. A small minority removes the majority's freedom to read, think, and learn. Our First Amendment right is being dismantled.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2023, Fayette Democratic Women surveyed its members who identified *The Prevention of Censorship of Books in Public Schools and Libraries* as one of their top concerns. Our impact team responded by researching the issue to provide information and a list of possible actions. This White Paper seeks to deepen our members' and friends' understanding of the issue and to act on the belief that the freedom to read books of different perspectives fosters empathy and compassion for all.

¹ <https://www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/bannings-and-burnings-in-history>

ISSUES and INFORMATION

Book banning is the most widespread form of censorship in the United States with children's literature being the primary target. PEN America, a nonprofit organization, recorded more book bans during the 2023-24 school year's first semester than in all the previous school year. From July 2023 to December 2023, PEN America recorded 4,349 instances of book bans across 23 states and 52 public school districts. In the 2022-23 school year, 3,362 books were banned, a 33% increase from the previous school year. Collectively, last fall's bans impact millions of students. Among the most frequent targets are books about race, gender, and sexuality. Book bans and curriculum censorship are driven by "parental rights" legislation and by politicians and school boards taking sides in a culture war. Consequently, the librarian or teacher is caught in the middle.²

Book banning prohibits access to a particular book and usually includes removal from a school or public library. There are different nuances of challenges, explains Emily Knox, PhD, an associate professor and author of *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*.

- **Redaction:** "When you put a line through something because you don't like that word, or you cover up an image if you don't like that particular image."
- **Relocation:** "When you remove something from its intended audience [and aim it at] a different audience," she says. "This is when people say, 'This book isn't appropriate for 7-year-olds; it needs to be in the [young-adult] section.'"
- **Restriction:** "When you require permission to read something," she says.
- **Removal:** "What most people think about when they hear 'book banning'—it's saying, 'This book needs to be removed from the collection, from the curriculum, from my sight,'" she says.³

According to the latest data from PEN America, the most banned books in the country right now include topics of race, mental health, LGBTQ issues and politics,

² <https://pen.org/report/narrating-the-crisis/>

³ <https://www.rd.com/article/book-banning>

offensive language, gun violence, sexuality, and sexist content. Here are just a few books frequently listed:

- *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson
- *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe
- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
- *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* by Margaret Atwood
- *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins

Even the classics you might have read in high school aren't exempt from challenges. Celebrated authors like Maya Angelou, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Alice Walker, and Judy Blume have all faced bans. Regarded by many as some of the best books ever written, here are just a few titles among many classics that have come under fire in recent years:

- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison⁴

The American Library Association (ALA) has a long and strong history of championing reading without restriction as a fundamental right. ALA was established in 1876 to support the First Amendment as it pertains to libraries, librarians, and library patrons. The First Amendment protects all students' freedom to receive and express ideas.⁵ The Republican Party and the group *Moms for Liberty* have increased the number of challenges to books and discussions in classrooms across the country.

Right-wing politicians, conservative Washington, DC think tanks, and the Fox News-led conservative media seek to distract and divide us with classroom culture wars. It's a coordinated political strategy to undermine public education and democracy. They are focusing on a Christ-centered education for all, the marginalization of black and brown races and their history, the removal of LGBTQ

⁴ <https://www.rd.com/article/book-banning/>

⁵ <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/american-library-association/>

rights and dignity, and the subjugation of women and girls. Although “parents’ rights” is a powerful piece of political rhetoric, in most instances, it is being invoked to mean rights for a particular group of parents with distinct ideological views, rather than a neutral effort to engage all parents and students in ensuring that schools uphold free speech rights.

While all parents and guardians ought to be partners with educators in their own child’s education, public schools are by design supposed to rely on the expertise, ethics, and discretion of educational professionals to make decisions. Today’s political rhetoric of “parents’ rights” is being weaponized to undermine, intimidate, and chill the practices of these professionals, with potentially profound impacts on how all students, not just their own, learn and access ideas and information in schools.⁶

Florida and Texas lead the nation in bans; in Georgia, educational gag orders cause school librarians and teachers to be intimidated and fired in many districts, such as Cobb and Forsyth, for discussing race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ issues in K-12 and higher education.⁷ Despite Georgia’s Republican senators increasingly filing censorship bills, all four of their bills failed to pass during the 2024 session. A group of over twenty legislators had signed on to each of these bills, all of them from one party, all running for re-election in 2024.

Senate Bill 390 would have cut Georgia’s ties to the American Library Association by banning public money for dues or programs. **SB 154**, known as the “Lock Up Librarians” bill, would have subjected them to criminal charges for distributing “harmful materials to minors.” **SB 394** would have created an appointed state council instead of local school boards to set standards for books that could be banned. And finally, **SB 365** would have given parents the right to receive email notification each time their child obtains school library materials.⁸ Unless more Democrats are elected in November, these bills may resurface in the 2025 session.

⁶ <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/book-banning/>

⁷ <https://pen.org/report/educational-gag-orders/>

⁸ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/search?ch=2&d=1&s=1031&p=1/>

Conversely in 2022, the Georgia Assembly passed two restrictive laws: **HB 1084**, a gag order prohibiting teachers from discussing a list of “divisive concepts” about race.⁹ **SB 226** changed the way school libraries operate, removing some local control and consolidating power at the state level to make it easier to remove books with allegedly “offensive content.”^{10 11}

CONCLUSION

Censorship is about control. A repressive society damages children and their ability to think, imagine, and see themselves in books. Banning books and censoring classroom discussions can have much wider implications, beyond students and schools. Our democracy is at stake. “A society in which book banning is acceptable is no longer a free society,” ACLU Attorney Vera Eidelman says. “It is instead one in which the government tells the people what books to read—and therefore what ideas to encounter and, ultimately, what to think. It weakens education and prevents people from learning to think for themselves.”¹²

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

1. Attend your school board meetings and get to know your elected representatives. Let them see you in the audience. Speak up and report back to your allies, friends, and neighbors.
2. Write and phone your elected officials on pending legislation. We must talk to policymakers and lawmakers if we want to change things.
3. Write an op-ed or a letter to the editor of your newspaper.
4. Have conversations with your child to learn about their concerns. Listen more than give advice.
5. Speak up when it matters, emphasizing the importance of free expression in a democracy and the right to learn about yourself and the world.

⁹ <https://legiscan.com/GA/text/HB1084/id/2565991>

¹⁰ <https://www.qpb.org/news/2022/03/31/general-assembly-sends-library-book-banning-measure-gov-kemp>

¹¹ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20212022/211263>

¹² <https://www.rd.com/article/book-banning>

6. Support the federal BOOKS SAVE LIVES Act by Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) to help ensure an inclusive learning environment and to counteract the harm of book bans across the country.¹³
7. Express gratitude to teachers and librarians as an act of resistance to encourage them to continue defending books.
8. Recruit and inform leaders/candidates who share your values and goals, and are willing to stand up to the politically-motivated extremists.
9. Start a banned book club, either in your local community or online. Strive for inclusion and diverse representation among your members.
10. Give out banned books as door prizes at your general meetings.

ORGANIZATIONS TO FOLLOW AND JOIN

1. **PEN America** - PEN.org
2. **Unite Against Book Bans** - UniteAgainstBookBans.org
3. **American Library Association** - ALA.org
4. **The Author's Guild** - AuthorsGuild.org
5. **Every Library** - EveryLibrary.org
6. **The Education Trust** - EdTrust.org
7. **National Coalition Against Censorship** - NCAC.org
8. **Fight for the First Amendment** - FightForTheFirst.org
9. **Georgia First Amendment Foundation** - GFAF.org
10. **National Freedom of Information Coalition** - NFOIC.org
11. **Freedom to Read Foundation** - FTRF.org
12. **American Civil Liberties Union** - ACLU.org

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¹³<https://pressley.house.gov/2023/12/14/pressley-unveils-bill-to-confront-rise-in-book-bans-ensure-inclusive-learning-environments/>