

# HOW TO FIGHT BOOK

# BANS &

# CENSORSHIP



**Book  
Riot**

# Introduction

Kelly Jensen

We live in a climate of censorship, masquerading as “parental rights” and “freedom.”

In PEN America’s [most recent report on the state of book banning](#) in the United States, they found a reported 4 million students have lost access to materials in their school libraries. This does not, of course, account for the millions of people outside of the public school system who have lost their right to access books and information in their local libraries. Despite claims that people can get books anywhere at any time, this is patently untrue. Access is not universal, and two of the foundational institutions of American democracy—the public library and the public school—are becoming less welcoming places for the most marginalized among us. Those individuals do not have the money, time, transportation, or digital means to simply purchase what it is they want at any time they want. They depend upon these public institutions to satiate their intellectual curiosity, their informational needs, and their recreation. Even the most privileged among us need and deserve these institutions: they are among the few “third places” socially, where consumerism is not expected in exchange for services. More, the greater the population who has access to education and educational materials, the more capable, productive, and wholly developed we are as a culture.

This is, of course, precisely why book banning has ignited. The more capacity the populace has to question authority and dismantle oppressive systems, the less power white supremacy and its associated regimes truly have.

It is easy to feel defeated. The only other time in modern history of such *tremendous* book banning was during the rise of Nazism.

But just as there has been a renewed sense in removing books, so, too, has there been a coordinated effort to reaffirm the First Amendment rights of all people. The First Amendment guarantees freedom to all, and among those freedoms are those to access a wide range of materials, to utilize one’s voice to push back against rising fascism and bigotry, to tap the press to cover the systemic erasure of entire groups of people. Rather than feeling disempowered in the face of book bans, why not consider this moment as the precise one to push back?

*How To Fight Book Bans & Censorship* is your guide to understanding censorship. It covers a little bit of everything, from historical roots of book burning to how to build thoughtful book displays featuring contemporary banned books. This book is for book lovers, whether or not they work in a public institution and have control over the materials made available to others. It offers tools and talking points for speaking up and out against book bans and on behalf of the intellectual freedom and right to read for all. These pieces have been penned by book lovers, as well as educators, library workers, and booksellers passionate about ensuring that books and the institutions which provide access to them.

This book is your guide to empowerment in the face of censorship. It is your tool to help push the conversations forward. It is one way to help ensure books and the information within them remain available to anyone who would like them. May this book help you refine what and how you speak against censorship.

Your voice matters.

# What is a Book Ban?

## What is a Book Ban?

Danika Ellis

If you open up any one of hundreds of news stories of rightwing "parents' rights" groups trying to have book removed from schools for having queer characters or mentioning the existence of sex, you might notice a common refrain: "We aren't banning books. Anyone can buy it on Amazon if they want." There are so many problems with this sentiment, but the first one is that it has become abundantly clear that book banners don't actually know what a book ban is.

It seems like everyone wants to ban a book, and no one wants to be a book banner.

But the truth is that a book ban isn't the same as making it illegal to buy or sell that book in the entire country. It's not putting a book title in the same category as selling heroin or looking for elephant tusks on the black market. It's absurd to shift the goal posts by trying to say that book banning is an on/off switch, where as long as someone, somewhere, somehow can access the book, it's never been banned.

So what actually is a book ban? According to the [American Library Association](#), "A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials." A book does not have to be removed *everywhere* to be banned. Usually, book bans happen on a local level: a book is banned from a school, a district, or — in circumstances that are unfortunately becoming less rare — a state.

This definition makes sense intuitively. After all, if someone is banned from a business, they don't immediately have to leave the country. We can ban things on a numbers of levels: it just requires someone of some authority to enforce it, whether that's a school principal or a politician. There are different degrees of book bans: a teacher may ban an author's books from being allowed in their classroom because of their personal distaste for their work, or a state representative could try to have whole categories of books (queer books, antiracist books, sex education books) banned from all schools in their state.

In some ways, it's encouraging that this wave of book banners is so uncomfortable having their action labeled accurately. It shows that even in that extreme corner that thinks that *Heather Has Two Mommies* is a kind of pornography and that being taught about Ruby Bridges is "reverse racism" — even they know that the people banning books are not generally the good guys.

It's important that we not let them sidestep this reality, though. If it was about parental choice, then they wouldn't be calling for these books to be removed from school and public libraries, which prevents families from making their own choices. Instead, they want to impose their worldview — which is overwhelmingly white, cis, and straight — on everyone. This is why it's censorship and it's why it's a book ban.

Parents have always had the ability to control the media their child consumes, but they can't expect schools and libraries to mirror that and enforce it for them. That responsibility lies with the parent, especially because each family has their own definition of what is age appropriate.

Libraries and public schools have a different mission: to represent and serve their entire community, including people of color, queer people, and trans people.

Building a book bonfire is not the only way to ban a book, and neither is making it illegal on a federal level — which would be a first. Book bans can be subtle and quiet, occurring in a single classroom, or they can be contentious affairs yelled over during a [library board](#) meeting, or they can be handed down by state representatives and enforced with lawsuits.

It's also disingenuous for this group to claim they're not trying to make these books illegal, considering the rise in lawsuits against anyone involved in carrying them, including [suing a bookstore for carrying \*Gender Queer\* and \*A Court of Mist and Fury\*](#). It's not necessary to make a book illegal in order to ban a book, but this wave of book banners is certainly not above exerting legal pressure in order to try to remove books from schools, libraries — and even bookstores.

To the book banners who are busy scouring books for one scandalous line in hundreds of pages, or printing out comic panels to wave at school board meetings, or otherwise lobbying to remove books from readers' hands, I wish I could show you the beauty, hope, and life-saving effects of those books. I wish you could understand that the world offers so many incredible ways to be a person, and that these books help kids feel less alone. I wish you valued trans kids' lives over your own comfort. I wish you saw the necessity of tearing down injustice to build a better world. I wish you would use all that anger and energy to help make things better instead of painting over the problems that exist. I hope you embrace the whole abundant spectrum of people your kids may grow up to be. I wish you saw that the diversity shown in these books is what makes communities stronger and a better place to live. I hope you see that some day.

In the meantime, though, I have a request: own the book ban label. And if it makes you uncomfortable to call what you're doing book banning, explore that feeling a little longer, and see if that leads you somewhere different.



## Is a Curriculum Update a Book Ban?

Kelly Jensen

Nuance is crucial for understanding book challenges, and because there's a lack of nuanced discussion around the ways in which book challenges have appeared in the last year, it's been easy for those seeking censorship to claim that in any and all cases of book-related discussions in public education and libraries.

**Intent** is key.

Take for example, [Maus's removal](#) from McMinn County Schools's 8th grade curriculum. During the board meeting, it becomes clear pretty quickly that the book is not being targeted for being about the Holocaust. It's instead being targeted for having crude language and images that several board members found disturbing (even when they admit to the Holocaust itself being disturbing). Digging into the [board transcript](#), something interesting comes up: the copies that were being used in the curriculum were censored prior to students getting them. Profanity was erased. But that wasn't enough for the board, who believed it to be too disturbing to remain in the curriculum and thus, it was pulled.

Indeed, the book isn't inaccessible for students. It's currently available at the McMinn Central High School library, and despite all of the claims that a ban on the book would create immense interest, as of writing, [multiple copies of it are still on the library's shelves](#). The book is not in schools where 8th graders use the school library, nor is it in classrooms. Despite not being pulled outright from the entire school district — a piece of nuance too many aren't noting — it *is* censorship. This book, which even some board members said was a solid text for learning about the Holocaust and emphasized that parents had the right to opt their children out of reading for class, was instead pulled from the curriculum. The book, by an author whose lived experiences were informed by the Holocaust, is no longer an anchor text.

*Maus* made a group of adults uncomfortable enough to censor the text before it ever got into the hands of students. It made them more uneasy because of it being a comic. There were no similar books that could offer the same look at the Holocaust — again, this is right [in their discussion at the school board meeting](#) — so they simply removed it. **It is not on the district approved list.**

Mukilteo, Washington, voted in late January to remove a book from their curriculum, too, but in this case, the intent behind the decision showcases not censorship, but instead, understanding for curriculum updates. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was previously used in 9th grade classrooms as required reading, will no longer be utilized as an anchor text for a few reasons: first, the language comes without context (in other words, the use of a derogatory word for Black individuals is never challenged or pushed back against in the story — more on this in a second) and second, the approach of the story's look at racism posits a white savior narrative (it's about being a good white person who doesn't believe in racism, as opposed to the experience of living in a racist world as a Black person). Both of these reasons can be summarized as *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird* was a product of its time, and while it still has tremendous literary merit, does not represent new knowledge, insight, or perspectives on the lived experience of racism.

**The book remains on a district approved list** as supplemental reading and is available for students in classroom libraries and school libraries. Teachers can even still teach it if they wish; it simply isn't required reading for all 9th graders across the district.

[There's yet to be a book selected to replace the title](#), but in recent years and in other districts across the country, titles like Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* and other Black authors' books about lived racism experiences by Black characters have been used instead of Lee's.

Mukilteo did not censor the book. It did not censor language from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It instead listened to comments made about the book, considered its community — the majority of students there are not white — and decided to look for books that cover the same topic but [through a lens that is more contemporary](#). In stark contrast to the McMinn School Board, the members of the Mukilteo board reread the book being discussed and elected to have a nuanced conversation about the ways to best serve their students in today's world. They did not purposefully remove books that made them uncomfortable.

Groups like [Disrupt Texts](#) have worked for years to help educators be empowered to update their curriculum to better represent the students they teach. Public education is meant to be for all, despite being founded on white supremacist principles and beliefs; the disruption comes via working to create a more even education for students of all backgrounds, not just white ones. They aren't the only grassroots group helping educators be better leaders, but their name is among the most well-known, and their website does a tremendous job, too, of breaking down the difference between their efforts of [curriculum update efforts and what censorship is](#).

An update is inclusive.

Censorship is exclusive.

But without nuance, without looking at the intent behind book challenges and removals, it's easy and convenient to assume they're one and the same. That's certainly helped fuel right-wing talking points and agendas.

Inclusion? Exclusion? The talking points make it clear.



## Soft and Quiet: Self-Censorship In An Era of Book Challenges

Kelly Jensen

In the wake of ever-increasing book challenges, legislature meant to silence educators, and hostile board meetings for schools and libraries, what's gone unsaid is the means by which professionals within these institutions have had to radically alter the ways they select material.

"They're asking 'who's going to complain?'," explains Anna\*, "not 'who needs this?'"

Anna, who works as a school librarian in suburban Wisconsin, is in an ideal situation when it comes to potential book challenges. Her school, already targeted this year by right-wing censors, has a robust collection development policy and an administration that supports the decisions made by its educators and library staff.

Still, what's happening inside the school reflects an even-bigger censorship issue: [quiet censorship](#).

Quiet censorship — also known as soft censorship or self-censorship, terms used interchangeably — is when materials are purposefully removed, limited, or never purchased at all despite it being a title that would serve a community. It's always been an issue with intellectual freedom, but now, with more "parental rights" groups demanding curricular and collection oversight, even the best professionals who don't believe in censorship are falling victim to choosing the path of considering the people who may complain over those who may need the material.

In Anna's school, this plays out in several ways.

"I was working with a really bright, innovative teacher who was rethinking how to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* in class. We were building a reading list that could supplement the text for her honors class, and based on the teacher's criteria, I suggested *Out Of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez," Anna said. "The instructor said to me 'I can't afford to add it because of the attention it'd bring.'"

That cost-conscious language is chilling, especially knowing that one of the big goals of the groups pushing for censorship is to [create a cascade of time- and dollar-heavy distractions](#) within schools and libraries. This is now not only part of the equation those working in these institutions are considering, but it's also what makes soft censorship appealing. If the book's never included, then it can't create the situation of a challenge or pushback from parents, community members, or those who simply enjoy being part of the disruption of public education.

Anna notes another piece of soft censorship emerging within her school — again, one with all of the supports and structures in place to be a space where any and all choices of material by professionals are respected and regarded as appropriate — is where books are being shelved.

“None of our libraries have purchased *Too Bright to See* by Kyle Lukoff, despite it being a multi-award-winning middle grade book. If we do buy it, we’ll have a copy in the middle school library, but none in the elementary schools,” she said. “We have a single copy of *Melissa* by Alex Gino, again in the middle school and not the elementary school. Books about gender or sexuality are put in the middle school and don’t make it to the elementary schools.”

Middle grade books, appropriate for readers from 3rd to 7th or 8th grade, would fit into the elementary school libraries by age and content appropriateness, be it Lexile level, award accolades, and/or critical acclaim. The books haven’t been pulled, per se. But they’ve never had the chance to reach their intended readership. Considering who is going to complain before who needs to see themselves in these books is dangerous and it’s the line of thought those working to ban books seek to create in the minds of those within public institutions.

That pressure becomes a challenge for educators and library workers who wrestle with just how far they can put themselves on the line for a book. Where all parents claim they desire a diverse collection and educational material for their children, the feedback is far less thankful and much more likely to elicit calls of *but not like this or this*. They game the system, demanding that both sides are played, and the power of censor-friendly groups is much larger than any individual within a library or school, even in supportive environments.

Anna explained: “One teacher told me they couldn’t use *Here To Stay* by Sara Farizan as a class read because it was about a Muslim person. ‘Someone would yell about that,’ the teacher said. Books like these fit perfect for the curriculum or unit, but now we’re too focused on who might be mad about it and not the value it has.”

Making collection-appropriate choices to serve a diverse world shouldn’t be radical, and yet, thanks to the fears and costs associated with those choices, it is. While educational institutions are short staffed, with fewer people eager to enter these fields because of their politically charged realities and historically low pay, teachers and librarians worry they’ll lose their jobs, healthcare, and entire lives by fighting these battles. This is precisely what’s at stake across the country as [more states institute educational gag orders](#) and introduce legislation aimed to create a culture of fear within public institutions like schools and libraries.

An individual’s ethics are unable to withstand the realities of capitalism, and more, by choosing to battle, any individual knows their name will be all over the internet. Their reputation may be smeared by those seeking censorship in ways that impact their ability to even be employed again.

And in many cases, individuals aren’t safe to be whistleblowers inside the institutions where they’re seeing such soft censorship. [Middle school librarian Gavin Downing](#) is still employed by Cedar Heights Middle School as a librarian, despite calling out the soft censorship in which his principal engaged. [Librarian Brooky Parks](#), on the other hand, lost her job with High Plains Library District for bringing light to their censorship-friendly programming policy.

If no one speaks up, though, the true breadth of quiet censorship remains unknown.

Ronna Dewey is a parent of three living in the Downingtown Area School District (DASD) in Pennsylvania. Downingtown is about 30 minutes from Lower Merion, the epicenter for one of the largest parental censorship groups in the country, No Left Turn. Moms for Liberty has an active chapter in the area, too.

Beginning in October of 2021, school districts in the Philadelphia suburbs began to see book challenges at their meetings. Among the most notable for Dewey included a challenge at North Penn school district. At the meeting, a challenger wore a Moms for Liberty shirt and read passages from *All Boys Aren't Blue*, creating a viral moment for the group as it was shared on Moms for Liberty's social media.

A board meeting at West Chester Area School District four days later brought a challenge to *Gender Queer*. It was no normal challenge. The meeting was so disruptive that [it made national news](#) and word spread across local social media as well.

Downingtown had been spared so far, but that changed October 27, when the Uwchlan Township Republican Committee shared a blog post on Facebook calling out materials in DASD they believed were sexually explicit and “pornographic.” Four seats on the DASD school board were up in the election that would happen a week later, November 2.

No formal complaint was filed by any individuals associated with the Republican Committee, nor by a parent.

A Facebook post on DASD's page on October 29, 2021, though, indicated that three books were removed from Downingtown West High School.

Due to “allegedly-inappropriate language and images,” and their appearance on a “nationally-circulating book list,” *All Boys Aren't Blue*, *Gender Queer*, and *Me, Earl, and The Dying Girl* were immediately removed from the library. That nationally circulating list was either from No Left Turn or Moms for Liberty — these groups operate from using the same lists, scanning pages and creating shareable content on social media that national and local censorship groups use in their complaints.

DASD removed the books without a formal complaint, and Dewey said they never once informed the parents or school community beyond a social media post. Parents would have needed to tune into the November 3 virtual school board meeting to hear about the initial decision to pull the books for review.

The transparency here is far more than in many schools practicing this quiet or soft censorship. But the school has a [formal review process](#), following a formal complaint about material, and these books were pulled because of a circulating list and pressure from groups outside the school. Not because any individual or group followed the proper channels. Notably, the school has an informal complaint policy, too, to which the superintendent is to resolve the matter informally as well.

Of note in the review process in either case is that books will remain accessible for students. Likewise, the policy spells out under its guiding principles that “No parent/guardian has the right to determine instructional reading, viewing, or listening material for students other than his/her own children.”

[At the November 3 meeting of the school board](#), Dr. Emelie Lonardi, Superintendent of DASD updated the board and attendees about the decision to pull the books for review. It’s a disturbing response, particularly for its condescending, anti-intellectual language about what the superintendent wishes she could do to these books, as well as for the clear disregard for the professional judgment of her own staff: She wished she could rip pages out of *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and that the art in *Gender Queer* was graphic, like caricatures.

It’s clear that by attempting to pull the books, the school wanted to get ahead of potential social media blowback, especially in the wake of the posts by the local Republican committee. But the school also failed to follow in its own reconsideration policies, removing the books and keeping them off shelves for months — they were not returned to Downingtown West High School until after the January 12 school board meeting.

In the interim between the November and January meetings, the DASD administration formed a committee to reevaluate their reevaluation policies. Further, despite attempts to hide what was going on by addressing it in a circumvent way via Facebook, DASD drew significantly more attention to what they were doing, as seen in the comments section and [subsequent update to the initial post](#). Notably, the update mentions their work on reevaluating the selection policy and that “while we do believe that varied perspectives help to create a more inclusive, well-rounded understanding of our community, we are also sensitive to the age-appropriateness of materials and a parent’s right to decide what is suitable for their child.”

DASD also has a [policy for selection of materials](#), including that selected titles showcase a range of beliefs, experiences, and backgrounds, and that decisions are made with “principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice in selecting materials.”

Policies and procedures are but paper when not followed, and without question, the superintendent’s personal opinion not only clouds this situation but will impact future decisions made by qualified staff.

The books may be back on shelves while this process is underway, but what concerns Dewey and what should concern any parent in this district is the blatant disregard for their own policy, not just in removing the books without reason, but in their disregard for parental notification beyond the Facebook post. More, the superintendent’s own perspective shades the process, something they pride themselves in not allowing to happen.

“I am concerned that silent censorship will continue. For example, school librarians may be afraid of ordering potentially controversial materials in the future for fear of retribution. I’ve seen several local librarians put on blast on social media and have their jobs threatened. Librarians will need the full support of the District administration. Will they get it?,” asked Dewey.

Dewey's concern is warranted. Among the proposed changes for DASD book selection for its libraries include each item in the collection being labeled as to its content in the catalog, as well as a recommended age and reading level. Those descriptions might include noting sexual content or graphic violence and new language in the proposed policy gives leeway for personal judgment to make those determinations. Of special concern is this: "Titles that are determined to be pervasively vulgar with respect to language or images and/or contain content that is determined to be morbid, degrading, or excessively interested in sexual matters or work that is not educationally suitable which taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, historical/political, or scientific value will be excluded from the library."

This is a slippery slope and opens wide the door to soft censorship. Who determines what those standards are within the context of providing a wide and necessary collection of material? If it's the library staff, what value system do they use to determine appropriate titles? In this particular district, it's clear where the superintendent stands — she made her feelings well known at a board meeting — and knowing that, library and school workers rightfully fear that their superiors won't support their decisions.

Instead of fighting for books like *Gender Queer* or *All Boys Aren't Blue* in the future, it might be easier to simply not purchase them at all, as these professionals weigh the choice between who might get mad and who might need the material.

"In the proposed new guidelines," Dewey explained, "parents will have the opportunity to opt their children out of books, but with no requirement that they need to read a book prior to opting out. Maybe if parents who protested books took the time to actually read them in their entirety, rather than just cherry-picking words, phrases or pictures, they might see how valuable these resources can be.

Passages from *Gender Queer* have empowered censors. They've pulled pages out of context, showing them off at board meetings, sharing them across their groups, marking out talking points to use when they complain.

None of the pages they're using or citing are the most dangerous.

The most dangerous pages are the final three in the book. Kobabe, invited to teach a comics class at a high school, never once mentions eir gender. E doesn't note eir pronouns. When the class ends and e erases the chalkboard, e wonders about this choice.

"I wonder if any of these kids are trans or nonbinary, but don't have words for it yet. How many of them have never seen a nonbinary adult?" the thought bubble reads. "Is my silence actually a disservice to them all?"

E continues to consider this in the following two pages. Seeing a trans or nonbinary teacher growing up would have meant the world to em. But e didn't stand up and say something.

"Every time I fail to give my pronouns I feel like a failure. But coming out can still be really scary, even after all this time."

As e recycles the papers from the class, e looks out.

“Could a parent complain and get me fired?”

E erases the board and thinks about how the kids will never see em again. Thinks the administration would support em, especially since e’s just there a day.

“I think I’m carrying...more fear than I need.”

The following panel simply reads *erase* as Maia continues cleanup.

“Next time. Next time I will come out.”

Self-censorship is this promise, again and again and again. It is the impossible decision between who might get mad and who needs to be seen or heard.

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*\*Not her real name.*

## How Much Does a Book Challenge Cost?

Kelly Jensen

One of the many reasons book challenges have grown in the last year is that it creates tremendous paperwork and time investment on the behalf of a school district. This, in turn, allows those who challenge to point to [inadequacies in how schools are being run](#) because they've invested so much time and money into having a book in the facility they believe should not have been there to begin with. It creates a compelling argument for how tax money is misspent, furthering the belief many of these censors have that they should have the right to receive vouchers (on taxpayer money) to send their children to whatever school they wish.

But have we looked at this from the opposite side yet? Just how much money do these challenges steal from schools, which are already underfunded?

Let's do a little back of envelope math. Note that every figure here, unless otherwise noted, is an estimate. I'm aiming low on all estimates for the sake of simplicity and the sake of as much equity across schools country-wide. We know some states fund their schools better than others.

Francis Howell School District in Missouri has seen a number of challenges this school year, and as part of their reporting process, have noted the [costs of procuring each book](#) for the committee to review. Let's take a challenge of Tiffany D. Jackson's book *Monday's Not Coming* as our challenge example and use the cost of \$151 for the committee. That's the cost of the book, so assuming they spent \$20 on each copy, that comes out to 7.55 copies, one for each committee member. For generosity's sake, we'll round down to seven committee members.

Each member of the committee for reconsideration needs to read the book in full in order to evaluate and discuss the title. Some of the members of the committee will be administrators, some will be teachers, and others may be community members. For the sake of simplicity, we'll say they each cost \$15 an hour for their work (again, averages tell us the administrators and teachers should be making more than that hourly and if they're salaried, it's even more tough to quantify). If a book takes two hours to read, at \$15 an hour, for seven people, we've now sunk \$210 into that time alone. Add to the \$155 cost for the books, we're now at \$365 for the challenge of a single book.

We haven't yet gotten to the discussions. Perhaps the discussions will be two hours, too. They are likely to be a lot longer and stretch out over more than one meeting, but again, let's get as basic as possible. That's another \$210 in costs for time.

Add up the books, the cost to read the books, and the cost to discuss them, and **a single book challenge now costs \$575**. In Missouri, the state [caps its per student spending](#) at \$6,375. **Each single book challenge equates to roughly 9% of total capped spending per student in the state.**



You can imagine not only what that means when more than one book is challenged at a school, with real costs that are higher than the above-estimated ones, and and the tremendous cost of paperwork not included.

So indeed, this is a big cost. But it's a big cost being purposefully created by those who are eager to see the public education system crumble so they can have tax money used to fund private, usually religious, schools and continue harming the most vulnerable members of our society.

# Why the Freedom to Read Matters

## Kids Need Queer Books

Danika Ellis

[A North Carolina teacher read \*King & King\* to his third grade class, and somehow, it became a news story.](#)

There is so much going on in this piece, but the short version is this: Omar Currie noticed a boy in his class being bullied for being "feminine," including being called "gay." Currie (who is gay himself) addressed this by reading the picture book [King & King by Linda de Haan & Stern Nijland](#) to the class. Apparently, this worked: the bullied kid felt ["for the first time that he was okay just the way he was."](#) Then he was, of course, in the news because he won all the teaching awards.

Okay, maybe not.

Instead, the book choice was challenged three times, culminating in a meeting of 200 people. A committee voted that parents must be notified about every book read in the classroom. ["Currie says that requirement is burdensome, since he reads his students around 500 books in a 180-day school year."](#) The school was picketed by a parent whose kids do not attend Currie's class. I could quote a lot of [ridiculous homophobic comments](#), but I'll leave it at that.

In some ways, this is a positive story. Currie defended himself by saying, in part,

I repeatedly heard from school officials that the book might have been appropriate to read in a more progressive area without parental consent, but in Efland we need time.

These comments were made as if to persuade me that today is not the time to stand up and protect students ... but that change on all issues must come about slowly, even if the safety of my students is compromised.

This was met with applause from most of the people gathered, and the review committee ultimately sided with Currie. He feels, however, that the school district showed very little support, and is considering resigning at the end of the year.

Frankly, I'm tired of stories like this. *King & King* is not a controversial book. It's about two princes who kiss and get married. It's about as sexual as Disney's *Cinderella*. It's entirely age appropriate for third graders. It would be age appropriate for a two year old--though maybe a little long. Here's the thing: queer people are not optional. We don't appear at a certain time or place in life. We're always here. If you mean to teach kids about the world, you have to teach them about queer people in the same way that you have to teach kids that people have different religions than you, or different hobbies, or different diets. Otherwise, you're not protecting kids. You're giving them false information, which is confusing at best, and damaging at worse.

One of the [We Need Diverse Books](#) photos that stuck with me was David Levithan's, which I can't seem to find anywhere now, but it said something like "Because you don't always know you're the gay kid." I remember being a kid and finding a copy of [Heather Has Two Mommies](#) at my mom's school library and thinking "Huh, so you can do that!" It would still be years before I realized that I was one of "those people."

Kids need queer books. Because some kids are queer. And those kids who aren't will be sharing a planet with people who are. This is not about "sexuality," it's about love and relationships. If a teacher is gay, is it "inappropriate" for them to mention their spouse? It is not "age appropriate" for them to mention their family and kids?

There's one question that I'm left with after reading multiple news articles about this. If third grade is too young to learn about "homosexuality," then how did kids start calling other kids "gay"? Seems like they've already learned about it somewhere. Or is the problem not teaching kids about gay people, but teaching them that gay people can live happily ever after, too?

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*\*Note: This piece was written in 2015 but remains relevant in the context of continued rising censorship.*

## Sex Education Books Don't "Groom" Kids and Teens. They Protect Them.

Danika Ellis

When Robie Harris began research on [It's Perfectly Normal](#), she was told by friends and colleagues, "Don't write this book. It will ruin your career. You'll never be published again."

It was the early 1990s, and the concept of an accessible book about puberty and sex marketed towards kids and tweens was radical. More than 20 years later, it's still in print — and [it's still radical](#).

Sex education books are one of several categories being targeted in this [latest wave of book bans](#), especially those that include LGBTQ topics — the anniversary edition of *It's Perfectly Normal* was updated to include trans youth. The rhetoric sounds awfully familiar to the book bans of the '90s, where titles like *It's Perfectly Normal* and [Heather Has Two Mommies](#) were accused of sexualizing kids and/or turning them gay. LGBTQ books and sex ed books continue to be some of the most popular topics for book challenges, and while the '90s saw gay authors and teachers being called pedophiles, the new right-wing buzzword is "grooming" — which is only the slightest update to the same accusation.

In the book [You Can't Say That!: Writers for Young People Talk About Censorship, Free Expression, and the Stories They Have to Tell](#), edited by Leonard S. Marcus, Harris shares some of her experiences writing the book, her collaboration with illustrator Michael Emberley, and the censorship attempts of the title (and its companion book, [It's So Amazing!](#)) over the decades. She talks about how carefully both Emberley and herself considered every aspect of the book, from the text to just how much a blanket should cover in a certain illustration.

She's gotten accustomed to the book being challenged in schools and libraries, though it never stops being painful, and often reaches out to librarians and teachers with information about the professional reviews and awards it's received to help arm them in the fight.

At an event, a librarian shared with Harris that *It's Perfectly Normal* kept disappearing from the shelves. She replaced it several times, but it kept happening, and it was beyond their budget to keep doing so. Then, one day, they all came back in a backpack with a note: "I took this book because I thought no child or teenager should read it. Then my 14-year-old niece got pregnant, and now I realize that children do need books like this."

Harris and her sex education books have been accused of a lot of things, but she remains grounded in the knowledge that education is powerful, and that kids deserve access to reliable information about their bodies. "How can we hold back writing about powerful feelings, or not include certain information children crave and have the right to know, simply because we are afraid?", she wrote in [2012](#).

The most illustrative story she shared, though, was about a 10-year-girl in Delaware who picked up her book when at the library with her mother. Her mother let her check the book out, and

when they came home, she showed her mom the chapter on sexual abuse and said, "This is me." She was being abused by her father, and it was the first time she'd spoken about it.

The father was convicted, and the judge said, "There were heroes in this case. One was the child, and the other was the book." Harris wrote in to add that the mother was also a hero in this story, for listening to her daughter, and that the librarian who ordered the book and kept it on open shelves also made this possible.

In the interview with Marcus, Harris said:

I have been called a pornographer, a child abuser — every name in the book, as the saying goes. But whenever I am called one of those names, I think of that ten-year-old girl. I wish we never had to talk with kids about any of these aberrant behaviors. But we have to do so because they already know about them to some extent and because kids have a right to have the accurate information that can keep them healthy and safe. They need to know how to get help to make any abusive behavior stop.

When right-wing groups petition and protest to get sex education books off the shelves of school and public librarians, this is the effect. It stops the most vulnerable people in our society from accessing the tools and language that can help them. It helps to shield and hide abusers. It communicates to children suffering from abuse that they are shameful, and that it's not safe or polite to speak out about.

Many right-wing "parents' rights" groups have claimed that they're asking for a compromise: they just want to move these books to the adult section, or from school libraries into only public libraries, or to keep them behind the counter. But this story wouldn't have been possible if *It's Perfectly Normal* was in the adult nonfiction section or kept behind the desk. The kids who most need these books are the least likely to be able to get to them if they have to jump through hoops to do so.

The timeless book banning cry has been "Think of the children!" Groups pushing to pull sex ed books (and LGBTQ books and books by and about people of color) off the shelves claim they're doing it protect kids. But ignorance doesn't protect anyone. Next time you're choosing between attending a school board meeting or staying home, between speaking out for or against sex ed books in schools, between having a difficult conversation with your kids or putting it off for later, remember that 10-year-old kid in Delaware, and all of the kids suffering in silence. They need your voice to find their own.

## Sex in Young Adult Books Is Age Appropriate

Danika Ellis

It's been a common scene recently: at a school board meeting, a parent will read out a passage from a book shelved in a high school library and exclaim some version of, "There is sex in this book!" This, we are led to believe, is a slam dunk. High school libraries should not carry sex books. Teenagers should not read sex in books. Sex is automatically inappropriate content for teenagers. But is it really age inappropriate?

I'm reminded of a book challenge I read recently for [It's Perfectly Normal, a book about puberty](#) aimed at ages 10 and up. In the book challenge document, the person filing the complaint had painstakingly taken pictures of every instance of nudity. The anatomical text, they explained, was fine, but the illustrations were unnecessary.

But what could be more age appropriate for a kid going through puberty than a book that discusses puberty? How can illustrations that teach children the names of their body parts be inappropriate? And how is a book supposed to give any useful information about puberty without mentioning the mere existence of sex or nudity?

[55% of American teenagers](#) have had sex by the time they're 18, and 29% are [sexually active](#). Whether or not adults want that to be true, sex is part of many teenagers' lives. And whether or not they're having sex, it's absurdly naive to think that they're only encountering the topic in school library books.

While there are no concrete stats available for American teens, a study of European teens across six countries found [59% had watched porn](#), and 24% watch porn at least once a week. The information teens would get about sex education from the books in their libraries would be much more safe and realistic than learning from porn.

Reading about sex can serve different purposes for teens. It may be educational: to learn about consent and safer sex practices. It can model a healthy relationship to sexuality, including establishing boundaries and getting clear consent.

For teens who aren't having sex, or who are unsure about their sexuality, books can be a safe way to "dress rehearse" sex with no stakes. Reading about sex can allow them to think about how they might feel in that situation, and gauge whether it's something they want to pursue. This is a much safer strategy than just jumping into a scenario they're not sure they're mentally or emotionally prepared for.

It can also just serve the same purpose sex does in adult fiction: because it's realistic for those characters and suits the story. It doesn't have to be educational. Many teenagers have sex, and there's nothing wrong with being able to see that reality in the books they're reading. YA books don't just exist to mold teens into perfect citizens. They're for entertainment, to provoke thought, and to play all the other myriad parts books do in our lives.



(Side note: high school libraries are not carrying pornography. None of those books exist solely for sexual interest, and it's ridiculous to think that an isolated comics panel or paragraph in a book is where teens will be looking if that was their main objective. Having sexual content is not the same as being pornographic.)

Having sex as a teenager isn't ethically wrong. It's not a crime. For every person, they're going to have different boundaries about when it's safe and comfortable to do so, if they want to at all, and they shouldn't feel pressure to have sex. But acting like the very topic is scandalous and shameful does not make those choices easier. Giving teenagers the information to make their own informed decisions makes for better outcomes.

Many of the people protesting sex education books or sex in YA will say that it's a discussion that should be between a parent and their child — an old abstinence-only education talking point. The truth is, many (most?) teenagers do not feel comfortable talking to their parents about sex. And with the over-the-top displays of outrage we've seen in these board meetings from parents on the topic, how would they? As nice as it is to imagine that every student will be able to walk up to a trusted adult in their life and ask any questions on their mind about sex, it's not realistic.

Besides, even if that was true for most students — even if, somehow, 90% of teens felt perfectly comfortable asking their parents for birth control tips — that shouldn't be how we build our public school systems. We should be watching out for the students who don't have a safe support network. What about the teens who have difficult relationships with their caregivers? Why should they be left with no resources to educate themselves? Modeling an education system around the idea that every student has an ideal home environment is worthless.

Lev Rosen, author of [Jack of Hearts \(And Other Parts\)](#), has seen his book frequently challenged even before the most recent wave of censorship. His book addresses questions about sex that real teens across the U.S. have asked. [He explains](#):

Teenagers want to know these things. Giving them answers and telling them not to be ashamed of their desires and how to pursue them safely and consensually isn't hurting them, it's helping them take control of their bodies and wants.

In addition to the fact that sex is an uncomfortable topic for most teens to broach with their parents or guardians, questioning your sexual orientation or gender can be even more confusing and isolating. Books allow for that exploration without having to talk to your family about labels that you're not even sure fit you. For students with homophobic or transphobic families, these books can be a lifeline to let them know that they're not alone, and that they will be able to find a community.

For queer kids in particular, Rosen worries about the effect that the homophobia and transphobia amplified in these school board meetings will have on them:

Imagine being a closeted student and watching some mom of your peer — or yourself — cry about how she'd be horrified if her teenager came home with a book

about a queer person. That means if you went home and said you were queer, you'd be hated, probably more than the book.

In addition to sex education books, puberty books, and sex in YA novels, these book banners also object to the mention of rape or abusive relationships. They argue that students should be protected from this content. But [10% of American teens](#) report having experienced sexual violence — 15% for girls — and 8% have experienced physical dating violence.

What message are we sending to kids and teens who have experienced sexual assault, that their experiences are too shameful and inappropriate to even acknowledge? How can their own life experience be age inappropriate? And how can we protect teens from unhealthy romantic relationships when we won't even acknowledge they exist?

It's a sign of how pervasive abstinence culture is that saying a book in a high school library has sexual content is supposed to be inherently scandalous. Teens deserve to access to these books, both for practical purposes and because they should be able to read stories that are relevant and interesting to them, not just the sanitized 50-year-old classics the adults in their life want them to read.

Of course, the topic of sex in teen books is in some ways a smoke screen. Book banners know that saying they want to ban a book because it has queer content or because it has a Black main character is likely not going to be received well, so instead they insist they're just outraged about the sexual content or profanity, and that's it's a coincidence all the books they object to are queer and/or by authors of color.

Look, talking about teenagers having sex or reading about sex or thinking about sex is uncomfortable. But don't let that discomfort rob students of valuable resources. Being a teenager is hard enough. We don't need to make it worse.

# The History of Book Bans: How Did We Get Here?

# The History of Nazi Book Burning

Julia Rittenberg

The rise in book censorship across the United States is reminiscent of the fascist tendencies throughout history. While book banners and censorship supporters paint their concerns as specific to contemporary issues, it's a common way to consolidate power. The history of Nazi book burning is one of the most obvious antecedents to the censorship of books in the U.S.

[Book burning began](#) shortly after the Nazi Party took control over the government: "Beginning on May 10, 1933, Nazi-dominated student groups carried out public burnings of books they claimed were "un-German." The book burnings took place in 34 university towns and cities. Works of prominent Jewish, liberal, and leftist writers ended up in the bonfires."

However, this was not the first time Germans had burned "un-German" books. In 1817, groups of students demonstrated their patriotism for the unification of Germany by mounting massive bonfires of books. At this time, what is now Germany was a loose collection of cities. This moment of censorship was driven by the [conceptions of race and nationalism](#) spreading across Europe.

With these ideas came the need to define what was German and what was not. Exclusion is necessary to create an enclosed nation. Part of the rhetoric of German nationalism was that all true Germans were Christian. Some German nationalists believed Jews could assimilate only if they converted. German Jewish people disagreed and fought for equal recognition under German law. Gabriel Riesser, a prominent Jewish activist during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, argued that the Jewish people's participation in the army validated their German identity, not their faith.

The German poet Heinrich Heine [wrote](#) with chilling clairvoyance, "where one burns books, one will soon burn people." Although Germany was officially unified in 1871, chaos and power-grabs in the form of nationalistic fervor were quick to dominate the country.

## **Ideological Purpose of Book Burning**

As soon as they took power in 1933, the Nazi Party swiftly enacted their agenda to enforce racist, exclusionary ideology. The Minister for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, spearheaded this mission to "synchronize" German culture by rooting out supposed "un-German" material and stirring up nationalist fervor.

While the Nazi Party also worked to bolster their hard power with military might, the consolidation of soft power through cultural destruction was equally important. Goebbels took a broad approach to the discipline of the German people through controlling their cultural appetites. The Ministry oversaw the institution of the Hitler Youth, what foreign press was allowed and what the national press said, film censorship, and suppressing counter-propaganda. Anything that criticized the methods of the Third Reich or their policies had to be quashed or demonized.

Although Goebbels was antisemitic from a young age, the Nazi Party truly radicalized him and gave him the opportunity to enact such draconian policy. The fundamental belief of the Nazi Party was that the Jewish people (as well as other un-German forces) were the source of all of Germany's ills. When the Nazis took power, Goebbels pushed for [immediate action](#) against the Jews, banning them from using public transport and requiring all Jewish-owned businesses to be labeled as such.

All these actions served to create a culture of fear and exclusion to support flawed idea of Aryan purity. Book burnings, visible markers of difference, and tight control of widely distributed media (like films and radio) all served the division of people living in Germany and set the stage for future inconceivably evil actions taken by the Nazi Party. Since everyone was either supportive of German purity, or too scared to speak up for fear retribution, the Nazi Party could push any policy they wanted.

Taking the time to separate German and un-German texts (even if a number of them originated in Germany) also allowed the Party to define the enemy. The un-German forces defined by the Party were texts from Jewish writers, socialist writing, anything democratic, or foreign authors.

### **Schools as the Locus of Conflict**

On April 6, 1933, the Nazi German Students' Association [announced the book-burning action](#), which was called an "Action Against the Un-German Spirit." German university students were early supporters of Nazi ideology in the 1920s and were eager to display their German nationalism through these censorious actions.

This was a coordinated effort on the part of the Ministry that oversaw the German Students' Association. Local university chapters received press releases, visits from high-ranking Nazi Party members to give speeches, and radio time to publicize the action. Goebbels wanted to dominate the radio airwaves and the print press in order to consolidate soft power over the German people. He wanted them to feel justified in their outright racism in the name of German purity. The low-level buzz of German right-wing nationalism was impossible to avoid.

The German Students' Association also drafted "12 theses," a deliberate callback to Martin Luther's 95 Theses. The 12 theses were posted around university towns and [outlined the ways](#) in which the Nazi Party believed the Jewish people were attempting to destroy German culture. Whatever individual students may or may not have believed, the universities were pushed to act as stewards of the Nazi Party's conception of German purity.

On May 6, 1933, the first book-burning action took place. The [Institute of Sexology](#) was targeted by German students. The library of the Institute collected over 20,000 texts about intersexuality, homosexuality, and transgender people. Magnus Hirschfeld, the founder of the Institute, also performed the first gender confirmation surgery on Dora Richter, who died in 1933 and was most likely killed in the chaos of the book burning action. This initial step was part of the Nazi Party's mission to ban all "deviant" sexuality.

Across the country in [34 towns with universities](#), students and Nazi supporters gathered to burn books. The image of the ritual is [very familiar](#): “On the evening of May 10, in most university towns, right-wing students marched in torchlight parades ‘against the un-German spirit.’” The Charlottesville, Virginia right-wing rally of 2017 replicated this image exactly.

The book-burning in Berlin was the largest event. Goebbels spewed rhetoric of German purity to 40,000 spectators at the Opernplatz. That day, over 25,000 books were burned in total.

### **What Was an Un-German Book?**

Before the burnings, the propaganda ministry worked with booksellers and university leaders to compile blacklists of authors who did not align with Nazi policy. [Helen Keller’s books](#) were burned not only because she lived with disabilities, but she was also a socialist and a pacifist.

Other authors on the blacklist included authors who were not born in Germany, writers who supported the Weimar Republic, Karl Marx and all other communists, socialists like Bertolt Brecht, anything written by a Jewish author, pornographic writing, or writing that advocated for a bourgeois lifestyle. The seemingly endless list of books was also taken to libraries in Poland, which were forced to only stock the “pure” German texts. Of course, the many Germans who wrote books about socialism or art or culture were not allowed in these libraries or universities anymore.

### **An Un-German Response**

Counter-protests immediately sprang [across American cities](#), and the American media responded with shock and warnings about what the Nazi Party would do in the future to further push for German purity. [American Jewish leaders](#), who were attempting to sound the alarm about the Nazi Party, organized protests and marched against the “culture war” against the destruction “un-German” culture. In New York City, [over 100,000 people](#) marched in opposition to the actions of the Nazi Party.

[Targeting culture](#) is a necessity for dictatorial control. Fascist leaders seek to crush any thoughts that might encourage resistance to their regime. However, there was consistent opposition to the Nazi regime. As Helen Keller said in her [open letter](#) to German students the day before the book burnings, “History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas.”

As these methods of cultural restriction rise in the U.S., it is deeply important to oppose book bannings and pay attention to what government officials mean by un-American when they choose to ban books about queer kids and racial injustice.

The fact that state governments are choosing schools to start the book bans is also deliberate. The Nazi Party exerted control over universities and children through the Hitler Youth program in order to raise compliantly racist Germans. American schools filled with students with no knowledge of the Middle Passage, the Jim Crow era, or internment camps will pay no attention

to the erosion of protections for marginalized people under federal or state law. If they know nothing about discrimination, they can't fight it.

They're also fed a false narrative of American exceptionalism, similar to the narratives of German purity that drove the book burnings. The [news-making banning](#) of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman could even preface a future in which students learn very little about the lead-up to the Holocaust and fail to recognize the signs of dictatorial cultural power.

The ideology of book burnings and bannings are obvious in their aims. Pruning away "un-American" literature is part of a concerted effort to silence dissent, crush progressive political movements, and eradicate the concept of marginalization and privilege. The [most challenged](#) books of [2021](#) are disturbingly similar in themes to the books Nazis wished to eradicate. Books about race, gender, and sexuality will continue to be targets. [Fighting book bans](#) is a book lover's moral imperative.



# The Correlation Between Sundown Towns and Book Bans: Forsyth County, GA

Caitlin Hobbs

*Disclaimer: due to the topic of this article, there will be some mentions of racial violence and a brief mention of sexual assault.*

There has been a massive uptick in book banning since July 2021. Now, this trend has been going on for a while, in clear view if you've been paying attention. But recently? It's gone from a few instances here and there, queer books being quietly removed from school shelves, to city governments firing librarians for not pulling queer books from their shelves, parents demanding schools not use books with the barest hint of anything resembling Critical Race Theory (CRT) in teaching, even private companies like Barnes & Noble getting pressured to not sell certain books. All in the name of "protecting children." But there's another trend, one that is clear if you're paying attention and far too obvious once you realize it: a lot of these towns pushing book bans are historically linked to being sundown towns. Especially in Forsyth County, Georgia.

## What are sundown towns?

If you need a refresher, or like me grew up in a Southern/very conservative area (the two are not synonymous) and they just didn't get to this in history classes, sundown towns are pretty close to what it says on the tin. During the Jim Crow Era, if you were not white or Christian, though these towns usually focused on Black individuals, you best be out of town before the sun sets. Sometimes, it wasn't just a town, it was an entire *county*. If a Black family tried to move into the area, they would be harassed until they had to move out for their own safety. If you were passing through, you would be watched until you left, and if you didn't make it out before the streetlamps came on, I hope you had some way of protecting yourself. Most of these towns or counties didn't have ordinances on the books calling for this, the vast majority of the time it was the community coming together and collectively deciding that folks that didn't look like them were not welcome and could not stay. With, of course, the exception of maybe one or two black families who were in service to white folks living there, and any interracial children that happened. They could stay, but that does not mean they were welcome.

If you've heard of the [green book](#), it was probably in this context. [The Negro Motorist Green Book](#) listed towns that were safe for Black road-trippers to visit, where they wouldn't be denied food or accommodation at restaurants and hotels, and won't have to fear for their lives. It covered not just the United States, but also Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda. It became known as "the bible of Black travel during Jim Crow," and remained in publication, getting regularly updated, until the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964.

If you're interested, there's actually an [online database](#), started by James W. Loewen of [Lies My Teacher Told Me](#) fame, where you can click on a state and see a list of what sundown towns or counties have been recorded thus far in that state. There are only two states not listed on the map, those being Alaska and Hawai'i. Every other state has at least a small handful of sundown

towns in them. Even your super liberal state. Some places like Texas and Kentucky have a lot. This is a living database as well. It is not complete and only lists those that have enough information to confirm it as a sundown. They also track what towns have worked to rectify the past and do better. I highly recommend clicking through and checking out their other resources, as there is a lot more than just a database.

### **What's that got to do with Forsyth County, Ga and book bans?**

Forsyth county (not the city, that's in a different county) is one of my county's neighbors in Georgia, and the entire county was sundown. [To an extreme amount](#). In 1912, in Oscarville, a white teenage girl was found beaten in the woods. Some local newspapers reported that she was raped. She ended up being in a coma for two weeks before dying from her injuries. One Black man was arrested for the crime and confessed (after being threatened with drowning and subjected to "mock lynching") and four other Black men were arrested as well, three as suspects and one as a witness. Later the same day those four Black men were brought in, a white lynch mob broke into the jail house, shot one of the Black men in his cell, dragged his body through the streets and strung him up from a telephone pole. And that was just the beginning.

[Following the girl's funeral](#), over the course of a couple months, white mobs started forming called "Night Riders," with participants not just from Forsyth county but from neighboring ones as well (including my own, which was not considered sundown). These Night Riders terrorized the Black citizens of Forsyth county, telling them they had 24 hours to get out of town or they would die. Their houses, churches, and banks would be burned down, livestock killed, and would randomly fire into cabins owned by sharecroppers or other Black renters. About 98% of the Black community in Forsyth county fled, most of them losing their property to the white community. To this day Forsyth county is majority white, with the next largest demographic being Asian. Only 4.4% of the population was Black at the last census. If you want to read a more in depth history of what happened here, and the lead up of racial tensions to this incident, there's [Blood at the Root](#) by Patrick Phillips, a resident of Forsyth county.

[And would you believe that Georgia currently has 13 book bans in place, placing it 12th out of 50 for school book bans, and all those bans have come from a singular county: Forsyth? Texas takes the cake at 713 bans though.](#)

### **Forsyth County's Book Bans**

The books currently banned by Forsyth county as of July 2022, [according to PEN America's tracker](#), are as follows:

- [The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie](#)
- [Me and Earl and the Dying Girl by Jesse Andrews](#)
- [The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood](#)
- [All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson](#)
- [Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan](#)

- [The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison](#)
- [l8r, g8r by Lauren Myracle](#)
- [The Infinite Moment of Us by Lauren Myracle](#)
- [Out of Darkness by Ashley Hope Pérez](#)
- [Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult](#)
- [Juliet Takes a Breath by Gabby Rivera](#)
- [This One Summer by Mariko Tamaki](#)
- [Hockey \(Check, Please! Series\) by Ngozi Ukazu](#)

If you look closely, you can notice a trend with these books: they all contain content that goes against the most stringent of Evangelical Christian beliefs, beliefs that were usually held by sundown towns. These books point out that life may be more difficult for individuals who aren't white (otherwise known as critical race theory), feature queer content like same sex relationships or transgender individuals' memoirs, and women's reproductive rights, along with the standard reasons of having any sexual content or violence/bullying in them.

Essentially, books that could possibly cause kids to consider disobeying their parents in some way and question their currently held beliefs. Because if your kids start to question your beliefs, especially beliefs based in hatred, then you have to start looking into your beliefs more and then you might discover that you're not as good of a person as you once thought, that the harmful stereotypes you believe about others are just that, harmful stereotypes. And maybe then the people who taught you these things weren't as great as you thought, and your entire worldview ends up being called into question. Doing all of that is difficult, there's no denying that, and therefore not a lot of people are willing to do so. It's much easier to ban books that cause your kids to think differently than you and just ignore the fact that you are hypocritically trying to rewrite history in some cases.

This is the case across the board. The books are being targeted in the name of "protecting children," but they're all books that call into question the worldview held by these deeply conservative communities. [PEN America goes into this more themselves](#), tracking the trends of books getting banned in schools, what books get banned the most, even the political action being taken to enforce these bans. For instance, Forsyth county only has 13 books banned currently, all from January 2022.

But Georgia passed [SB226](#) in April 2022, extending Code Section 16-12-103 (which covers the sale and distribution of harmful/obscene material to minors) to school libraries, so that school principals have 10 days to remove books that have been called into question in some way and determine how obscene these books are. If they, the principal or school librarians in some cases, fail to do this in 10 days, they will be convicted "[guilty of a misdemeanor of a high and aggravated nature](#)." Before, administrators and librarians could say they'll look into it, and then just blame bureaucracy or any other excuse they wanted, keeping the book on the shelves. That loophole is no longer there. I'm surprised the list for Georgia hasn't expanded more already, though I doubt that it will get close to the number of bans Texas has, which again is 713 books. 713 books are banned from schools in Texas, [a state that has a serious impact on how textbooks are written](#).

## So What?

[I've written on book bans and the effects they have, especially on their authors, as have others](#), to the point where reiterating it is either beating a dead horse for those who have been paying attention, or just falling on deaf ears of those who don't care. So instead I'll leave you with this: a call to action.

Check the [PEN America index of school book bans](#). See if your school district is on there. If it is, fight against it. Attend school district meetings and push back. If you live in an area where you know you'll get drowned out (as a queer in a deeply red area my commiseration), make sure your kids and your friends' kids have access to these books, provide supplementation to their education, filling in holes you know are purposefully being left. Set up a [Little Free Library](#) near you ([or find your local one!](#)) and place books like the ones banned in there. Keep access to these stories open. And if your area hasn't started implementing bans, make sure it stays that way. There are things you can do, things that may seem small or insignificant in the grand scheme, but it's *something*. It's always better to do something.

## What Rights Do Students Have To Access Books?

Nikki DeMarco

Keeping books out of the hands of students is one way that people want to control minors' access to information. Book censorship has steadily been on the rise, and challenges [quadrupled in 2021](#). Couple this with the recent [attack on teachers](#) and [attacks on school libraries](#), and it raises the question: what rights do students actually have to access books?

The first place children can access books if they are not available in their homes is in school. Books can be found in classrooms and the school library. School libraries are vitally important for access, especially for children who don't have access to transportation to public libraries or the funds to purchase books at bookstores. The American Library Association's [Library Bill of Rights](#) article V states: "A person's right to use a library should not be **denied or abridged** because of origin, **age**, background, or views." The bill of rights specifically states age as a reason patrons should not be denied access to books.

Even more than the Library Bill of Rights, the [First Amendment](#) protects the rights of students:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

### [First Amendment](#)

The goal of the First Amendment is to create informed citizens capable of self-governance. Benjamin Rush, a statesman and founding father, [stated during an address to the people of the United States](#) in 1787 that "to conform the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens to our republican form of government, it is absolutely necessary that knowledge of every kind should be disseminated through every part of the United States." The right to information and knowledge has been viewed as essential to our democracy since its inception.

Further, the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) extends the limits of the First Amendment by protecting the people's [rights to public education](#). Now, not only is it federal law, but state and local laws also ensure access to education and knowledge. Public schools and school libraries are part of local government; they must follow the First Amendment.

Of course, adults in the community want to control what information their students have access to. This is nothing new. Books have been under attack by people wanting to censor them since the beginning of their existence. In 360 BCE, [Plato describes](#) what he believes the ideal republic would look like, "Our first business will be to supervise the making of fables and legends; rejecting all which are unsatisfactory."

Admittedly, it was much easier to censor books before the printing press because all a person had to do was burn that particular book and it would be gone forever. [Twenty years after](#)

Johannes Gutenberg changed the world with the printing press, Germany established their first official censorship office when an archbishop petitioned the town officials to censor “dangerous publications.” Pope Paul IV [ordered the first Index of Prohibited Books](#), *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, in 1559. And on and on.

In 1975, the war continued with [Island Trees School District vs. Pico](#). In this case, a New York school board received a [complaint from parents](#) in the community that school policies on library books were too “permissive.” The parent group complained about nine books specifically including Kurt Vonnegut’s [Slaughterhouse-Five](#) and Langston Hughes’s [Best Short Stories by Negro Writers claiming](#) they were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy.”

The school district removed the books in response in February of 1976 without the formation or consultation of a committee. A senior at the time, Steven Pico joined with other students to challenge the school board’s decision. A dozen free speech and library organizations filed briefs on behalf of the students. In 1982, the case made it before the Supreme Court, which resulted in a 4 to 5 ruling in favor of the students.

“Students may not be regarded as closed-circuit recipients of only that which the State chooses to communicate.”

#### [Tinker v. Des Moines \(1968\)](#)

An earlier Supreme Court case, [Tinker vs. Des Moines](#), which advocated for students’ freedom to wear armbands in protest of the Vietnam War, reasoned, “students may not be regarded as closed-circuit recipients of only that which the State chooses to communicate.”

Justice William Brennan [noted](#) that “special characteristics of the school library make that environment especially appropriate for the recognition of the First Amendment rights of students.”

This ruling is school library specific. It does not apply to curriculum development. Schools change which books are included and excluded from curriculum regularly based on pedagogical reasoning that material needs to be age appropriate. In [Virgil v. School Board of Columbia County](#), the Court of Appeals agreed with the school board’s decision to remove selected portions of texts from a humanities curriculum. By [upholding the removal](#), the court emphasized that the challenged texts remained in the school library allowing for what the Pico case called “[voluntary inquiry](#)” where the students could seek out the materials that were omitted in the classroom if they were curious. Students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate” ([Tinker v. Des Moines](#)), but they aren’t necessarily available in the classroom either.

The distinction of having the material available versus allowing that material to be taught is a fine line. The nuance of schools’ many responsibilities was highlighted in the 2021 [Mahanoy Area School District v. B. L.](#): “They must teach basic and advanced skills and information; they must do so for students of different backgrounds and abilities; they must teach students to work

independently and in groups; and they must provide a safe environment that promotes learning.” Given these responsibilities, school employees and officials have more to consider than other state employees when it regulates free speech and access to information for students.

“It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”

#### [Tinker v. Des Moines \(1968\)](#)

For example, in 2007 [Morse v. Frederick](#), the Supreme Court emphasized the importance of students' ability to participate in political speech while allowing school administrators' authority to discipline students who advocate for illegal drug use. A student was [suspended](#) for displaying a sign that read “Bong Hits 4 Jesus” across the street from a school while students were dismissed to watch an event outside. Holding the sign and using voice wasn't the issue, encouraging underage and illegal drug use was.

Access to free speech available in books in school is a sticky thing. Most states have enacted a “[harmful to minors](#)” obscenity statute. [Ginsberg v. New York \(1968\)](#) first introduced this concept when an adult magazine was sold to a 16-year-old, but it has its limits, because states can't simply ban minors' exposure to an entire category of speech, such as nudity, when it might only be inappropriate for only a portion of that group. Determining whether material is “harmful to minors” must consider the entire population of minors, including the oldest among them, and in high schools this includes people who are 18, 19, and 20. Many schools get around this by offering books of all levels in the library, should students choose to seek them out.

As [Theresa Chmara](#) put it, “Students' First Amendment rights in the school library context, therefore, are broader than those in a class, a school-sponsored assembly, or other curriculum based activities.”

“[T]he school board's non-curricular decision to remove a book well after it had been placed in the public school libraries evokes the question whether that action might not be an unconstitutional attempt to ‘strangle the free mind at its source.’”

#### [Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board \(1995\)](#)

In [Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board \(1995\)](#), it was decided that a book removal case in schools is based on the officials' motivation to remove a particular book. The court observed that, “in light of the special role of the school library as a place where students may freely and voluntarily explore diverse topics, the school board's non-curricular decision to remove a book well after it had been placed in the public school libraries evokes the question whether that action might not be an unconstitutional attempt to ‘strangle the free mind at its source.’”



Likewise, [Case v. Unified School District No. 233](#) (1995) found the removal of [Annie on My Mind](#) unconstitutional because a “substantial motivation” in the removal of the library book was the officials’ disagreement in opinion on the views expressed therein.

All of this doesn’t even touch on internet access and filtering provided by schools. [Currently](#), in Nebraska [a bill is being advanced](#) to require databases to remove all obscene material that is “harmful to minors.” Similar bills have already been enacted in [Utah](#) and [Tennessee](#).

School officials need to consider students’ First Amendment rights when making decisions about students’ access to books and other forms of information. Any decisions made to restrict access that are based solely in the officials’ disagreement with views expressed in certain materials, rather than on their educational merit, could open those officials up to timely and costly litigation.

Follett Learning, the supplier of books and creator of Destiny, a popular collection management system in school libraries, was [developing a technology](#) to allow parents to more easily monitor what their child was checking out at the school library. It would allow parents to block their children from checking out books in certain categories, such as [blocking access to LGBTQ+ titles](#). Follett has since [walked this plan back](#) after outrage from the public in response to their announcement.

It’s more important than ever for school librarians to [continue their work](#), even though [they are disappearing](#). There is hope. Learn how to [support libraries during increased censorship](#) and [reach out to your legislators about this issue](#) to ensure students are still able to exercise their constitutional rights.

## A Look Into the History of the Comics Code Authority

Julia Rittenberg

In January of 2011, [Archie Comics announced they would no longer feature the Comics Code Authority seal on their covers](#), shortly after DC Comics had announced the same intention. This was a monumental decision after more than 50 years of dealing with ridiculous and outdated restrictions in order to get the “seal of approval” from the Comics Magazine Association of America.

The establishment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 was largely a reactionary measure driven by overall fear of censorship. This was not a great time in history for media in America that was thought to be “dangerous” for children or anyone else.

### **Fear for the Children in the 1950s**

Before the Comics Code Authority, the [Motion Picture Production Code](#) (widely called the Hays Code) was applied to most major studio pictures released from 1934 to 1968. It was a self-censorship system to avoid the government censorship that could come down and limit the success of big studio movies. In 1968, this system was replaced with the Motion Picture Association of America’s (MPAA) rating system.

The reason this worked for as long as it did was because of the studio system. Hollywood was controlled by several large studios that could essentially decide how to make films that made money. For a long time, this meant sticking to the Hays Code. It had many rules that still influence film today: the requirement that queer characters had to be villainous or suffer tragic fates, regulations against the depiction and discussion of adulterous sex, and various other political rules.

McCarthyism was also a looming factor in the enforcement of the Hays Code. The House Un-American Activities Committee was investigating a lot of people in the entertainment industry and making random threats based on the fear of people disloyal to American in the post-World War II moment. This general fear of disloyalty made it way down to the five and ten cent comics that kids could pick up at any grocery store.

The Comics Code Authority was established in 1954, Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent* accused all comics of promoting delinquency and disregard for authority in children. He made this conclusion by asking young delinquents if they read comics, to which they responded yes. At the time, comics were so common and widespread for children that this would be like asking a kid in America today if they know what an iPad is. In the academic journal [Information & Culture](#), Carol L. Tilley argued that Wertham had largely fabricated and exaggerated his findings to arrive at a neat conclusion.

At the time, there was also a series of Senate hearings on the relation of comics to crime, but they did not arrive at the conclusion that comics caused crime. However, parent protests and

the general fearfulness around how media influenced children caused the creation of the self-censorship body the Comics Code Authority.

### **Rules and Influence of the Comics Code Authority**

It's easy to understand how a general worry about loss of revenue through protest would cause voluntary censorship of the comics. They were so widely available that submitting them to the CMAA for a read-over was a small price to pay to get that seal of approval that would allow parents to allow their kids to get comics. If publishers declined to send their comics to the Comics Code Authority for review, their comics could not be stocked in stores.

There were 41 provisions to stick to in the [Comic Censors' Bible](#) to get the seal of approval. The [general rules](#) that comics had to follow are easy to guess: no sex, no drugs, no cursing, ~~no rock n' roll~~, no nudity. The words "terror" and "weird" were banned from comic book titles. Additionally, cops had to always be right and correct, while villains always had to lose. These rules supposedly ensured the avoidance of tainting America's youth with sex, drugs, villainy, and communism.

However, the Comics Code Authority was forced to change and became less relevant over time before the complete abandonment in 2011. In 1971, a [review of the code](#) was caused by Marvel's request to publish special issues of [Spider-Man comics](#), which involved drug use. The Comics Code Authority subsequently relaxed certain rules in a way that was more in line with current freer attitudes towards sex, drug use, and the publication of horror comics with "disturbing" imagery.

Similar to the erosion of the Hays Code, the Comics Code Authority just became more limited over time, and people found ways around it. In the 1970s and 1980s, comic book publishers started to find ways to avoid the seal of approval all together. Instead of selling their comic books to stores that required CCA approval, they sold them to comic book shops that served comics lovers of all ages and didn't necessarily care about parental approval for comics. An example of a movie flouting the Hays Code to great success was *Some Like It Hot*. It was released [without the approval of the Hays Code](#) and was a massive hit.

In 1989, the code received updates again, partially because DC wanted to eliminate the seal of approval altogether to give a wider berth to their artists and writers. However, after 1989, the rise of independent comic book publishers and the fact that most comic books could be found in comic book stores meant that they weren't totally beholden to the Comics Code Authority's seal of approval. In 2001, Marvel withdrew from the Comics Code Authority's regulations and designed their own rating system. By 2011, Archie Comics and DC were the last two submitting for seals of approval, and then they were the last dominoes to fall.

### **Where Are the Queer Superheroes?**

In a similar fashion to comics censorship to meet CCA guidelines, large-scale comic book movies have scenes with queer characters being visibly queer removed from the [final cut of the](#)

[film](#). This could be a combination of the trickle down of the Hays Code and the Comics Code Authority. A common refrain from the studios is to blame international markets (like China) for the supposed “need” to cut possibly offensive material from movies.

The Comics Code Authority definitely regulated what kind of visible queerness was allowed in comics, but many comics historians argue that queerness is foundational to the invention of comics, like Ramzi Fawaz's comics history book [The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics](#). Video essays by [Rowan Ellis](#) and [James Somerton](#) also give good historical background to the issues of queer characters, queerbaiting, and queer metaphors in comics.

### **Comics Regulation Today**

Part of the downfall of the Comics Code Authority is probably due to comics readers growing up. Kids who loved comics in the 1950s grew up and naturally wanted to read comics that dealt with more complex, adult themes. Coupled with changing mores around sex, drugs, ~~rock n' roll~~, and depictions of violence, the Comics Code Authority quickly became a relic of the past.

Comics were thought to be [only for kids](#) for a time, and therefore had to promote good, all-American values to the children. However, comics were also an art form with an underground movement and a ton of interest in questioning authority, so it became difficult to maintain a super-wholesome image across all comics media. All publishers have their own internal guidelines and decisions, but the general idea is to tell good stories.

Like the rise of independent cinema after the downfall of the studio system, an industry-wide self-censorship body was more difficult to maintain. Nowadays, the [Comic Book Legal Defense Fund](#) can assist with comics that deal with censorship. It feels more important to protect the right to tell stories than to protect the nebulous idea of childhood innocence.

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Looking for more facts about the CCA? Check out [10 Things You Might Not Know About the Comics Code Authority](#).

## The Most Challenged Comics and Most Banned Comics Since 2000

Kelly Jensen

Comics censorship is an American pastime. While censorship has been raging for the last 15 months, book and comic censorship is nothing new. It's just found new legs with the help of right-wing, white Christian nationalism led by groups like Moms For Liberty, among others. Comics, which have been long-subject to censorship in America, beginning in part with citizens seeking to hide any comics with nudity or sex—[Tijuana Bibles](#), published from the 1920s until the 1960s, were one common form of very sexually-forward comics, often uncredited, that became an early target of censors. [The Comics Code Authority](#) took this a step further in the 1950s, better codifying and pursuing comics which did not meet their standards.

Comics continued to be the target of censors, as well as legal prosecution. When [Friendly Frank's comic shop in Lansing, Illinois](#), came under fire after a police officer deemed the owner to be selling obscene materials, the [Comic Book Legal Defense Fund](#) developed and has since helped support comics creators, sellers, librarians, educators, and readers in protecting their right to access comics. The officer, Anthony van Gorp, utilized the dog whistle of the '80s, claiming that in addition to obscenity, the shop was selling material of the [satanic influence](#).

Though comics has been a part of the American literary landscape for well over 100 years, it was not until the early 2000s when more comics began to make their way into schools and libraries. Many were, of course, of the superhero variety, but as comics became more widely accepted as a legitimate form of reading and literacy, more comics beyond the superhero worlds emerged. The late '00s and early '10s were especially vibrant times for comics for young people, and as such, censors made their voices heard, challenging and banning comics.

Many who challenge comics in today's era do so from a place of misunderstanding how comics work. As will be seen in the case studies linked below, adults often talk about how children have accessed a comic that looked like a kid's book and found something that was less suited to their age. Though comics enthusiasts, librarians, and educators have pushed to better educate people about comic literacy — a skill set separate from but related to print literacy, as it involves understanding the purpose of and meaning behind the use of images to tell a story — it is a skill set. As such, it is something censors can use to further their agenda. Anything with images is seen as material for children, despite the reality that many of the titles are published for adults and shelved with adult books.

From 2000 to 2009, the American Library Association — which at the time had a much more robust staff and budget dedicated to intellectual freedom — identified [zero comics among their top 100 most challenged titles](#). This makes a lot of sense; the format was still evolving. The story from 2010-2019, however, is different. Despite what was happening in libraries, with a rise in understanding of literacy and its myriad forms and a collection mirroring this, so, too, came the backlist from small but vocal minorities about how comic books were inappropriate. Many of the calls mimicked those of earlier censors, citing satanic influences, inappropriate content (read: sex and sexuality), and being "anti-family," "unsuitable to age," or "offensive political viewpoint." In that decade, 11 of the top 100 most challenged books were comics.

**[Drama](#) by Raina Telgemeier:** Challenged for being "[sexually explicit](#)," with some believing the book has a hidden agenda.

**[Bone \(series\)](#) by Jeff Smith:** Complaints about this series include being "[unsuitable to age group](#)," alongside being inappropriate because of drinking and smoking.

**[Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic](#) by Alison Bechdel:** Bechdel's memoir drew complaints for being pornography and that it might allow "[seedy people coming into the library and moving into our community](#)."

**[Persepolis](#) by Marjane Satrapi:** Satrapi's memoir drew complaints, including a ban in Chicago Public Schools, [for graphic images and inappropriate language](#).

**[This One Summer](#) by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki:** The multiple award-winning graphic novel has fielded challenges and bans due to queer characters, drug use, and profanity and — in an argument that still rages on — the belief [it is sexually explicit](#).

**[Neonomicon](#) by Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows:** [Challenged for being "pornographic."](#)

**[Habibi](#) by Craig Thompson:** This book has received some solid criticism from readers and reviewers, but that criticism differs from attempts to ban the book for being sexually explicit, containing nudity, and being "unsuitable for age group."

**[Saga](#) by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples:** Vaughan's series was deemed age-inappropriate, included sexually-explicit images, and that [it promoted anti-family values](#).

**[Stuck in the Middle](#) by Ariel Schrag:** The challenges to this middle grade graphic novel — challenged in Dixfield, Maine, [where Gender Queer has recently been pulled from shelves](#) — include objecting to its [language, sexual content, and drug references](#).

**[The Color of Earth \(series\)](#) by Dong Hwa Kim:** This first book in a Korean manwha series was challenged for being [unsuitable to the age group](#) (it is a coming-of-age story), nudity, and sexual content.

**[The Walking Dead \(series\)](#) by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore:** In light of the popularity of the television series adapted from the comics, it comes as little surprise to see this title included. [It is not entirely clear why this series drew ire](#).

Comics challenges and bans have only increased since ALA's last report. During this current wave of censorship, it comes as little surprise comics are a focal point and in particular, comics that explore gender and sexuality. *Drama* and *This One Summer*, published for the middle grade

and young adult audiences respectively, foreshadowed the current spate of censorship against queer books; they remain among the titles challenges and banned, though censors have expanded their targets, too.

*Gender Queer*, a coming-of-age memoir by Maia Kobabe, remains at the top of the list for most challenged book this year. It is Kobabe's own tale of learning to understand eir gender and the struggles to define eirself in a binary world. But rather than consider the story from [its literary perspective and appropriateness for young readers](#) who themselves are struggling understand themselves or others in the world, censors have delighted in blowing up two passages from the book without context. Those passages show on-page sex fantasies that are not only not lewd nor obscene, but they are common experiences of young people around the world.

It is a clear and willful misreading.

It is also a sign that, despite how much time, effort, and energy goes into comics literacy, a small group of well-funded, politically-fueled individuals will continue to showcase their illiteracy. Because in addition to pushing for the right to determine what other people can read, censors today highlight how little they respect art, how little they understand comics, and how eager they are to continue being ignorant about both.

Because ALA's compiled lists of challenged and banned books do not yet include the 2020s and because they do not release the titles of every book challenge they hear (instead releasing their top 10 lists annually), knowing the full scope of current comics challenges is tricky. But thanks to Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson, who has been [tracking every title challenged across the country](#) since last fall, it is possible to get an idea of how widespread comics censorship is right now.

Between October 2021 and August 2022, there have been at least 40 unique comics titles challenged. This includes at least 80 unique challenges or bans to *Gender Queer*, 25 to *This One Summer*, and about 20 each to *Drama*, Mike Curato's [Flamer](#), Cathy G. Johnson's [The Breakaways](#), and *Fun Home*. **Every one of these comics was banned or challenged due to LGBTQ+ themes.**

These are the most challenged and most banned comics in the U.S. right now, in order. This is based off information able to be found online, meaning that it does not represent silent or quiet censorship of books like this or the stories which mainstream and/or local media does not cover (for example, the quiet removal of *Gender Queer* [from Spartanburg Public Library](#)):

- *Gender Queer*
- *This One Summer*
- *Drama*
- *Flamer*
- *The Breakaways*
- *Fun Home*
- [The Handmaid's Tale \(Graphic Novel\)](#) by Margaret Atwood and Renee Nault
- [New Kid](#) by Jerry Craft



- [Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up with Me](#) by Mariko Tamaki
- [Class Act](#) by Jerry Craft
- [Check Please](#) by Ngozi Ukazu
- [Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda](#) by J.P. Stassen
- [Kiss Number 8](#) by Colleen AF Venable and Ellen T. Crenshaw
- [Maus](#) by Art Spiegelman
- [The Magic Fish](#) by Trung Le Nguyen
- [Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir](#) by Liz Prince
- [V For Vendetta](#) by Alan Moore and David Lloyd
- [Anne Frank's Diary \(Graphic Adaptation\)](#) by Anne Frank, Ari Folman, and David Polonsky
- [Brazen](#) by Penelope Bagieu
- [I Am Alfonso Jones](#) by Tony Medina
- [Losing the Girl: Book 1](#) by MariNaomi
- [Maus 2](#) by Art Spiegelman
- [My Friend Dahmer](#) by Derf Backderf
- [The Witch Boy](#) by Molly Knox Ostertag
- [American Born Chinese](#) by Gene Luen Yang
- [Delicates](#) by Brenna Thummler
- [Fairy Tail, Volume 45](#) by Hiro Mashima
- [Go With The Flow](#) by Karen Schneemann and Lily Williams
- [Hey Kiddo](#) by Jarrett J. Krosoczka
- [Lighter Than My Shadow](#) by Katie Green
- [Moonstruck, Volume 1: Magic to Brew](#) by Grace Ellis, Shae Beagle, and Kate Leth
- *Persepolis*
- *Saga*
- [Shirley Jackson's The Lottery The Authorized Graphic Adaptation](#) by Miles Hyman
- [The Fire Never Goes Out](#) by ND Stevenson
- [The Prince and the Dress Maker](#) by Jen Wang
- [They Called Us Enemy](#) by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, Harmony Becker
- [Wonder Woman: Tempest Tossed](#) by Laurie Halse Anderson and Leila del Duca
- [Y: The Last Man](#) by Brian K. Vaughan, Pia Guerra, Jose Marzan Jr., and Jose Marzan

It is impossible not to see the trends, even for readers who may not be familiar with comics. These books are queer, they are by or about people of color, and they are about immigrants.

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While there is a lot readers and champions of the freedom to read can do to [fight book bans](#), including making sure you are borrowing, reading, and requesting even more comics be available in your libraries and schools, there is something to be said, too, about the power of knowing the history of comics censorship specifically. Here are some excellent articles by devoted comics fans, comics creators, and scholars alike to help illuminate and contextualize the ongoing efforts to ban comics in the USA.



- [Censors Love to Target Comics Like \*Maus\*. Here's Why](#) from *Washington Post*
- [Comics Grapple with Bans Amid Growing Culture Wars](#) at the San Diego Union Tribune
- [American Comics Self-Censorship Comics Code](#) from New York Public Library
- [Comic Books, Censorship, and Moral Panic](#) from Princeton University's Mudd Manuscript Library
- [A History of Comics Censorship](#) at CBDLF
- [How American Paranoia Ruined Censored Comic Books](#) at Vox (content advisory for ableist title)
- The National Organization for Decent Literature: A Phase in American Catholic Censorship by Thomas F. O'Connor, [accessible via JSTOR](#). (This in particular ties into recent moves by [CatholicVote to remove queer books from public libraries](#)).
- [Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign](#) edited by John A. Lent International Journal of Comic Art

These are just the tip of the iceberg.

## How Faith-Based, Right-Wing Money Is Waging War Through Book Challenges

Kelly Jensen

How do book challenges relate to the disintegration of public education? While it seems that book challenges are about removing any discussion of people of color and queer people from classrooms — a truth worth acknowledging — it's much bigger than that. Book challenges are one of the many prongs being used by right-wing, faith-based groups to destroy public education as a whole in order to fight for school choice, vouchers, and a white-washed, "liberty" centric history.

It sounds like a conspiracy theory. It's not.

School board meetings have been inundated with angry parents, many aligned with groups like Moms for Liberty or No Left Turn or variations of similar local "parents rights" groups. They're attending the meetings and fighting against books in the curriculum or libraries that go against their faith-based beliefs. In addition, they're monitoring school boards for vacancies and being trained by groups with deep pockets to run for those very boards as a means of destroying the system from the inside. Further groups, including conservative, Christian-aligned publishers like [Brave Books](#) and [Heroes of Liberty](#), begin to donate these titles to schools and libraries while also spending scads of cash to rally more parents to request these titles for library and classroom collections (see: "[Moms of Libraries](#)," as well as library workers noticing an uptick in requests for books from either of these so-called "publishers" — these publishers are backed by dark money and money from major groups like the Heritage Foundation).

Book challenges are a tremendous waste of time for schools and their employees. The costs are high in time and in money, and they become a convenient arguing point for these groups, who can point to this as educational bureaucracy and a poor use of taxpayer money. If the books weren't there in the first place, staff wouldn't need to spend all of this time creating policies and procedures nor following them.

A slew of legislation across the U.S. only furthers this part of the agenda. In states like Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Iowa, and several others, politicians with established ties to these faith-based groups are proposing that schools now list every single book they own on their website so parents have quick access. It's "transparency," despite the fact that every single book in a library is available for parents to peruse via the library's catalog. But by demanding a list, **they're wasting more time, more effort, and more money**, further amplifying their message of how public schools are poorly using taxpayer dollars.

With this, these same faith-based, right-wing groups then demand vouchers for school choice because they don't believe their tax money is being used appropriately. (Note: masks are a part of this argument, too, and you'll see the book challenges and mask mandates go hand-in-hand.)

You can see this play out in Waukee, Iowa, a Des Moines suburb.

Back in October 2021, parents complained about a number of [queer books in the school district's library](#). It wasn't necessarily all parents in Waukee, as one of the loudest at the school board meeting didn't have children in the district at all. This happened less than a week before elections would decide who sat on that school board. The election was a high-interest one, as [eight candidates ran for a total of four seats](#), and four of those candidates were conservative. They'd created a political action committee called "[Warriors & Wolves United](#)," and their actions follow in step with [this handy guide](#) from Citizens for Renewing America. Citizens for Renewing America is a right-wing advocacy group founded by Trump's former budgetary advisor Russell Vought.

Ty Rushing does an excellent job highlighting more about [this particular political action group](#). The long and short is that the group lost the election, and if you follow the money, you see the ties to the Koch brothers.

Now, having lost the school board election, it's interesting to see a new political action group in Waukee has filed paperwork with the state, [Concerned Waukee Parents](#). The paperwork was filed by the same person involved with the paperwork for Wolves & Warriors.

Though Wolves & Warriors United's funding source disclosures don't point to any single individual or group bolstering their campaign, one of the ways they can circumvent such disclosure is through the sale of merchandise. They pushed this through their campaign, and even a cursory look through their social media posts and the social media posts *about* the group link them to another political action group in Iowa: lowans for Freedom. That group's events showed up in [Let the Parents Decide Waukee](#), another tool used by these groups to push right-wing, faith-based conservative agendas in the schools.

Funding for lowans for Freedom comes via the [Family Leader](#) — which "provides a consistent, courageous voice in the churches, in the legislature, in the media, in the courtroom, in the public square...always standing for God's truth" — and the Family Leader gets its funding from Focus on the Family\*.

The Family Leader is located in [Urbandale, Iowa](#), which feeds students into the Waukee schools.

Focus on the Family, aside from being grounded in right-wing, faith-based, white supremacist beliefs, not only has tremendous money, but also [runs trainings](#) to educate people on how to run for school boards and fight back against "woke" agenda. For them, "woke" agenda is anything not faith based.

Zoom out for a moment to Iowa as a state. One of the current bills in legislature is the so-called "educational savings account," a [pro-school choice initiative](#) that would allow private citizens to dip into taxpayer money for vouchers that would allow their students to attend a private school. The idea is to create competition so public school would need to "do better," and as the senators behind the bill note, it's rooted in the battles over masks and book in public schools. The clever caveat here from the senators is that minority students are falling behind in public schools and

giving them the chance to attend private schools on taxpayer money might help those test scores.

Waukee's school board on Monday night [approved a resolution in opposition](#) to this legislation, calling instead for the state to reinvest in public education.

At that board meeting? [Parents like Josh Briggs](#), whose name is attached to the [paperwork for Concerned Waukee Parents](#). Briggs wants vouchers to create competition and to allow for children to attend any school they please. Perhaps, even, one of those private, faith-based schools; this is a convenient way to circumvent the separation of church and state, as granted by the First Amendment — the very Amendment these book challenges undermine.

Who is supporting and indeed, helping fund bills like this school choice one in Iowa? [The Family Leader](#).

Koch and other heavy funders also back republican senator Jake Chapman, is among those behind Iowa SB 2198. This wide-ranging bill includes a proposal for Bible studies classes in public high schools to fulfill social studies requirements for students who choose to take it. Republican senator [Jeff Taylor told KPVI](#) that "Why the Bible? It has a disproportionate influence on U.S. history and American culture. That's just the way it is, good or bad, like it or don't. Culturally speaking, there's no comparison." Other religious works would not be included in such a course.

This same story is playing out across the U.S. Different players, different group names, but the funds behind them are coming from big organizations like Focus on the Family, the Heritage Foundation, and others that emphasize a singular white, conservative, Christian perspective and nothing else.

Note that this doesn't mean schools or libraries shouldn't have books by or about people with deep faith. They should, especially if they're serving their community. But those books should come from the host of reputable publishers creating them, with editors and an entire team dedicated to accuracy and quality behind them, not organizations with money and an agenda.

What it doesn't mean, though, is that groups like this should fund and infiltrate schools with their ideology.

It's a tremendous uphill battle, and faith-based, right-wing groups have money. They're funding propaganda and misinformation campaigns, packaging it in a way that tries to emphasize how schools are grooming children and handing them pornography. These buzz words unite them, as well unite them with their faith and belief that they should be able to use taxpayer dollars to choose where their children go to school.

These tactics are purposeful, coordinated, and damaging. It's about removing queer voices and voices of color. But it's also much more than that: it's about indoctrinating children with Christian conservative values. It's about lying and using money to keep lying.

[Follow the money.](#)

Reading challenged books matters. Talking about challenged books matters. [But in no way is "reading banned books" the solution to the real problem](#), and neither will buying those books, promoting those book, or offering those books for free. The fight is tremendously larger and much more well-funded than too many are willing to accept.

## Who Are “Moms for Liberty?”

Kelly Jensen

If you've spent any time reading through book challenges over the last year, one of the groups you've likely encountered by name numerous times — and will encounter in the links below — is Moms for Liberty. But who or what exactly is the Moms for Liberty movement?

Established in January 2021, the conservative nonprofit group, founded in Florida, brags of a 100,000+ membership as of mid-2022. Tina Descovich and Tiffany Justice, two former school board members in Brevard County, teamed up with Bridget Ziegler after Descovich lost a seat on the school board to a former district employee who campaigned against Descovich's anti-mask mandate agenda. Ziegler is no longer part of the group.

Moms of Liberty is an extremely well-connected organization to a variety of politically conservative groups and individual politicians, including Ron DeSantis, the vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party (Ziegler's husband), conservative Florida political actions groups, conservative celebrities like Fox news hosts, Florida state representative Randy Fine, the Koch-funded Heritage Foundation (see [last week's news roundup](#)), Parents Defending Education, PragerU, and more. Within just weeks of beginning the organization, they appeared across a host of right-wing conservative media outlets, including Rush Limbaugh, Tucker Carlson, Breitbart, and more. Media Matters does a fantastic job of [following the money and connections](#) of this group.

As of writing, Moms for Liberty boasts 165 chapters in 33 states. What makes them especially powerful besides their tremendous funding is their local level efforts: they operate by county, rather than city or state, meaning that action can be quick, organized, and targeted. Their pet projects include anti-critical race theory and anti-social emotional learning in public schools, book challenges, anti-mask mandates, and other legislation relating to education and COVID-related policies.

Those involved with the organization are proud of their involvement. They often will wear associated apparel — which is how the founders claim they've raised their money — and they will introduce themselves as part of the group in school board meetings or in press interviews. Moms of Liberty has acted as a template for fellow [failed school board candidates](#) to [create similar groups](#) in other U.S. states.

Keep this in mind when you read about book challenges or about the bills working through states across the U.S. that focus on "parental rights." These have taken hold in too many states to name, but among the most immediate are those in Florida, Texas, and Indiana. Watch where the money flows between and among the politicians proposing the bills and who they're associated with. It's hard not to see the ways they're working in tandem to destroy public institutions like schools and libraries in order to build for-profit institutions in their place. There's a lot of money available to them now, with untold potential wealth were these public facilities dismantled.

It's not about the books. They, like children, are pawns in the bigger game. Yes, racism and bigotry and homophobia are involved, but that's not the real motivation. Money, privatization, and control are. Those are all symptoms and results of white supremacy.

## Who are the Groups Banning Books Near You?

Kelly Jensen

This week, [PEN America released a report](#) on the current state of book bans in the USA. The report discusses the 50+ "parents' rights" groups operating across the country, both on the national and local levels, and how these groups are responsible or connected to at least half of the book bans that have taken place since July 2021. But who are these groups? Where are they located?

PEN's report lays out and links to several stories about various groups, including some of the nationally-organized groups.

Read the report, [particularly this section](#), to get a sense of what ideas these groups are formed around. For the most part, it's not just book bans. It's the broader issue of "parental rights," which became a movement in 2020 with parents demanding that schools "reopen" during the pandemic (the language here matters, as schools *were* open but operating virtually). The movement shifted in 2021 to demand that their children be unmasked in schools, and thereafter/simultaneously, to demanding oversight and say in curriculum and materials made available to students in schools.

The database below comprehensive, but represents a look at the groups who have been connected with or directly linked to book bans or challenges (or other curriculum changes under the guise of "parental rights"). Some are more active than others, and some have changed their names, consolidated, or otherwise reworked their structures even since this list was compiled. Some are parent groups and others are political action groups. Many of the groups are linked to either their Facebook or website presence. Not all states are represented, which does not mean there are not groups in those states. There are **not** national groups or their affiliated chapters included; PEN outlines those nicely above, and the embedded Tweet above shows, in gold, where the biggest organization currently has active chapters.

This list is incomplete by nature—knowing the full extent of groups is impossible, especially as their core aims are not identical and “book banning” is not often listed as one of them.



State	Groups with Parental Rights/Censorship Ties
AK	Alaska Parents' Rights in Education Save Anchorage
AL	
AR	<a href="#">Northeast Arkansas Turning the Page</a> <a href="#">Safe Libraries for Kids--Arkansas</a>
AZ	<a href="#">West Valley Parents Uniting</a>
CA	<a href="#">MB United</a> <a href="#">Newport-Mesa Uncensored</a>
CO	<a href="#">Pornography is Not Education</a>
CT	
DE	
FL	County Citizens Defending Freedom <a href="#">Protect Our Public Schools Manasota</a> <a href="#">Florida Citizens Alliance</a>
GA	<a href="#">Mary In The Library (Georgia)</a> <a href="#">Concerned Parents of Fayette County</a> <a href="#">Ladies on the Right (Savannah)//School Board Action Team</a> <a href="#">Fulton County Schools</a> <a href="#">Truth in Education--Speaks</a>
HI	
IA	<a href="#">Protect My Innocence (Pella)</a>
ID	<a href="#">Idaho Liberty Dogs</a> <a href="#">Push Back Idaho</a>

IL	<a href="#">AwakeLL</a> <a href="#">D303 Move Forward</a> <a href="#">Illinois Parents Rights in Education</a> <a href="#">We Stand for Our Students</a> <a href="#">Speak for Students</a> <a href="#">Illinois Family Institute</a> Parents Stand Up to Keep Pornography Out of D99 Schools <a href="#">Parent Union Cary</a> Sauk Valley Freedom Fighters Breakthrough Ideas District 158 Parents Union D202 Family Forum/Suburban Action PAC Elmhurst Parents for Integrity in Curriculum Famillys for Freedom (central 201) Geneva Parents United for Students Liberty First PAC New Trier Neighbors Speak for Students in Triad School District Villa Park Parents Union <a href="#">We The People McHenry County</a> Freedom 515 <a href="#">Parents of Antioch Community Committee</a>
IN	Advisory Book Club (ABC) Allen County IN <a href="#">Purple for Parents Indiana</a> <a href="#">Mary in the Library (IN)</a> Unify Carmel Unify Westfield <a href="#">Unify Fishers</a> Fishers One
KS	<a href="#">Kansas Parents in Education</a> <a href="#">Northland Parents Association</a>
KY	
LA	Citizens for New Louisiana Bayou State of Mind
MA	<a href="#">Kid Lives Matter</a>
MD	<a href="#">Delmarva Parent-Teacher Coalition</a>
ME	<a href="#">Maine First Project</a>
MI	<a href="#">Mary in the Library (MI)</a> <a href="#">Forest Hills Parents United</a> <a href="https://michiganlibertyleaders.com/">https://michiganlibertyleaders.com/</a> <a href="#">Restore Ottawa (Grand Haven, MI)</a> <a href="#">Mary in the Library Michigan</a>

MN	<a href="#">IlluminED</a> <a href="#">Take Charge MN</a> <a href="#">Mary in the Library (MN)</a>
MO	<a href="#">Northland Parents Association</a> <a href="#">FHSD [Francis Howell School District] Parents Uncensored</a> <a href="#">Concerned Parents of Nixa</a> <a href="#">St Charles County Parents Association</a>
MS	<a href="#">Mississippi Rising Coalition</a> <a href="#">We The People Jackson County</a>
MT	
NC	<a href="#">FACTS Task Force (Lt. Governor's creation: <a href="https://ltgov.nc.gov/facts">https://ltgov.nc.gov/facts</a>)</a> <a href="#">Pitt County Parents for Responsible Education</a> <a href="#">Dare to Share OBX</a> <a href="#">Pavement Education Project</a> <a href="#">Ed First NC</a>
ND	
NE	<a href="#">Protect Nebraska Children</a> <a href="#">Nebraska Taxpayers for Freedom</a>
NH	
NJ	<a href="#">Central Jersey Conservative Union</a>
NM	
NV	
NY	<a href="#">Long Island Loud Majority</a> <a href="#">Concerned B-Ville Parents REACT</a> <a href="#">Concerned Grandparents, Parents and Moms for Liberty</a> <a href="#">Speak up for Education</a>
OH	<a href="#">Protect Ohio Children Coalition</a> <a href="#">Ohio Value Voters</a>
OK	<a href="#">Edmond Did You Know?</a> <a href="#">Reclaim Oklahoma Parent Empowerment</a> <a href="#">Mary in the Library (OK)</a>
OR	<a href="#">Oregon Moms Union</a> <a href="#">Salem Kizer United</a> <a href="#">Salem Keizer We Stand Together</a> <a href="#">Save Oregon Schools</a>
PA	<a href="#">Woke Pennsylvania</a> <a href="#">Pennsylvania Advocacy for Children's Education</a> <a href="#">Penridge for Education Liberty</a>
RI	<a href="#">Gaspee Project</a> <a href="#">Parents United RI</a>

SC	South Carolina Parents Involved in Education GPS Parents and Citizens Against Mandates
SD	South Dakota Parents Involved in Education
TN	<a href="#">Responsible Education and Common sense Teaching (REACT)</a> <a href="#">Smoky Mountain PIE</a> <a href="#">Tennessee Liberty Project</a>
TX	EanesKidsFirst <a href="#">Make Schools Safe Again (Fredericksburg)</a> <a href="#">Between the Book Covers (Keller)</a> <a href="#">Granbury Texas Books</a> <a href="#">Prosper Citizen Group</a> <a href="#">Families for FISD Talk (Frisco)</a> <a href="#">Texans Wake Up</a> <a href="#">Mary in the Library (TX)</a> <a href="#">Lake Travis Family PAC</a>
UT	<a href="#">Utah Parents United (Behind "LaVerna in the Library")</a>
VA	<a href="#">Parent and Child Loudoun</a> <a href="#">Do Better FCPS (Fairfax County)</a> <a href="#">Fight for Schools (Loudon County)</a> <a href="#">Parents Against CRT (Loudon County)</a> <a href="#">Army of Parents (Loudon)</a>
VT	
WA	<a href="#">Informed Parents of Washington</a> <a href="#">Bainbridge Parents for Honest Education</a> <a href="#">Washington Parental Rights in Education</a> <a href="#">For Our Kids WW</a> <a href="#">Dayton (WA) Uncensored</a> <a href="#">Mary in the Library (WA)</a>
WI	<a href="#">Making Communities Great Again</a>
WV	Ohio County Concerned Parents
WY	

# The Streisand Effect Won't Save Us From Censorship

Danika Ellis

The [Streisand effect](#) is a term used to describe when a group or individual attempts to suppress or ban something (usually a book, movie, album, or some other creative work, but it can also apply to information) and ends up making it more popular. It's [named after Barbra Streisand](#), who sued a photographer for photographing her house and putting it online (it was part of a series of photos of the coast to document erosion). News of the lawsuit led to the photo being shared all over the internet, getting much further than would have happened without it.

At Book Riot, we cover censorship of books quite a bit. We even have a [weekly round up of censorship news](#). While book challenges are nothing new, they increased dramatically in 2021, especially targeting LGBTQ books, sex education books, and books by and about people of color. Whenever we report on these book challenges, we'll get responses that — whether they use the term or not — refer to the Streisand effect. Nothing makes kids want to read a book more than banning it, comments will say. I understand this response, and there is some truth to it, but it hides the real risks of censorship and book banning.

For one thing, sales of a banned book will only increase if it gets a lot of media coverage. For every scandalous story that makes national news, there are many more that are happening in school board and library board meetings that aren't being reported on. And even the ones that make the news start to get lost in the sheer volume of these stories. It's hard to imagine [all 850 books on Matt Krause's list of books to ban from Texas schools](#) saw a big boost to their sales.

Of course, there's also self-censorship, which leaves no record at all. How many teachers and librarians are quietly removing books from shelves, leaving them off syllabi, or declining to purchase them out of fear of the response? With the vitriol being hurled at school board meetings, it's easy to imagine many educators and librarians preferring to stick to less controversial (though also likely less relevant or meaningful) choices. This can in no way help sales. It can only take books away from readers.

Then, of course, there's the inequity of only measuring book sales. Even if a book sells tremendously well after it's been removed from a library, that doesn't mean the readers who wanted to access it now can. Libraries, especially school libraries, are critical for children's and teens' access to books. Many don't have their own means of buying books, and even those that do may not want to show their parents that they're reading about LGBTQ issues or safer sex practices. Libraries allow those readers access to vetted information, even if they don't check out the books — they can at least read them in the library and put them back on the shelf. (As many a closeted queer student has done.)

It's not that the Streisand effect is entirely inaccurate for book challenges: coverage and controversy definitely can sell books. [Jerry Craft saw sales of his book New Kid increase](#) after it was challenged for including discussion of racism. Some [bookstores stock and display challenged books](#) once they make the news. After Central York School District's book banning

news story went viral, residents [organized a book drive](#) to give the banned books away and received over a thousand donations of the titles from people all across the country.

It's heartening that so many respond to stories of censorship with support of the author, but we can't rely on it. We have to continue to [fight book bans and challenges](#) and not depend on increased sales to even them out. We have to be just as loud and organized as book banners to prevent censorship. The Streisand effect is not enough.

## Hero Syndrome in Book Banning Efforts

Kelly Jensen

Two years of pandemic living -- whether or not best practices were followed -- has left an entire generation trying to navigate what life looks like as we try to shift from pandemic to endemic. We're not there yet and we won't be for a while, but the changes in our social lives have absolutely made an impact on how we engage with others.

It'd be inappropriate to draw a line from pandemic isolation to pro-censorship groups. There is a line, but it's not necessarily a straight one. In fact, there are no straight lines anywhere when it comes to today's censorship culture. Groups like No Left Turn, Moms For Liberty, and any other "[parental rights](#)" focused organizations popping up across the US are uniting under the idea that they as parents have not had the right to see and dictate what their children are learning in school. There are several purposes behind these movements, including a [push for vouchers and school choice](#). Another element to this is the belief among these adults that schools are [teaching Marxism](#), and Marxism is tied up on [Alfred Kinsey's sex research](#). It's also [connected to critical race theory and social emotional learning](#), and ultimately, school indoctrinates young minds to [become queer](#) if they're not and/or hate themselves if they're white.

Parents have always had rights. School board meetings have always been open to the public. But because of how the pandemic forced parents to pay more attention where before they never had to, many found the connections with other like-minded adults gave them a way to rally together behind a cause. They've turned to local school boards to stand up for what they believe are just causes.

But these school board meetings have turned into something else, too: an opportunity to be a hero. The louder, the more outrageous, the more backed-by-others-in-blue-shirts/red-shirts/people-with-signs, the more attention those citizens receive. The more their names show up in right-wing social media. The more they're made templates for how to demand rights and ensure "liberty" and "freedom" in education.

In Leander, Texas, a woman [brandished a pink dildo](#) -- one she "borrowed" -- to make a point about the content of books made available as optional reading to high schoolers. Everyone remembers the woman with the pink dildo. That someone could quickly search "book ban" and "pink dildo" and get her name gives her hero status.

School board meetings are packed. [Prayer circles](#) are planned prior to these meetings. [Books are burned](#). Parents are [serving school board members with lawsuits](#) and [challenging their surety bonds](#).

Book removal tactics being employed now are not different than they've been in the past. Though our collective memory erases historical book censorship times, including in the 90s, when the American Library Association acted like a leader and outlined groups like Focus on

the Family initiating these book challenges, in the early 00s around LGBTQ YA books, and in the late 00s/early 10s as more graphic novels were challenged, what's happening now is not new. It's just on a much grander scale, thanks to social media creating spaces for groups to share and disseminate information on how to do this. Facebook groups offer how-tos, groups like Moms For Liberty run trainings, and other right-wing organizations have created tremendous tools for parents to run for school and library boards.

Hero syndrome is much more evident in a hyper-connected world. It gives people a feeling of purpose, and the more they can "empower" others to stand up, the more they are rewarded.

The Millbury Public Library, a small library in Millbury, Massachusetts, recently saw this play out. The road to four books being stolen is itself circuitous, but it was unquestionably fueled by the rush grown adults felt at the attention they garnered.

Early in the school year, parents began showing up to Millbury school board meetings to complain about curriculum, what they called a "[mini movement](#)" to take back their rights on what was being taught. Dissatisfied with the school board's response, several are now running for the board in the upcoming election in order to push their personal agenda.

In December, the Millbury Public Library Director Ann Dallair found four books that were checked out by a patron in October had yet to be returned. After the overdue notice went out, Dallair heard no response from the patron, who was given the option to pay for the books or return them. It wasn't until January she heard back from the patron, who stated they felt the books were inappropriate to be in the children's section and they would not be returning the books.

The books were in the young adult section.

Dallair continued to reach out to the patron, letting them know how materials are selected and that if they were still unhappy, they could file a formal complaint. In either case, the books needed to be returned. The patron never responded. The books were all queer titles, including *Camp* by LC Rosen, *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, and *Jay's Gay Agenda* by Jason June.

Jeff Raymond, a Millbury resident, current Friends of the Millbury Public Library President and former Trustee on the Board, learned of the missing books at a board meeting in February. Though he Tweeted about it, there was little traction. That is, until a now-deleted Facebook post emerged from a Millbury School Committee member about the four books. Tempers flared about the books' appropriateness, and added gasoline to an already-burning fire.

The parents creating chaos at the school board meeting and in the comments of that post were among those [who stole those books from the library](#).



[Quiet/soft censorship](#) isn't just about what is or is not done with intention by gatekeepers like librarians and educators. One of the reasons why it's quiet is that people don't know -- and if people don't know, they can't speak up. In the case of Millbury Public Library, quiet censorship happened because of parents seeking hero status. If they choose to borrow and not return the books, they've done their part to champion parental rights. They then empower others to do the same thing: just borrow the books and don't return them. Create an administrative headache big enough, and the fines for replacing those books will take a long time to realize.

Why the fear of young adults reading about queer teenagers is concerning and not the practice and modeling of theft (of public property, no less) is confounding. This same heroism of "borrowing" books with no intent to return is tried and true, but with the ability to be leaders of "mini movement," these parents are rewarded with a hit of serotonin for their efforts from others on social media and in the media.

It doesn't stop at theft though.

Troutman Middle School, in Troutman, North Carolina, is another school seeing tremendous parent/citizen engagement school board meetings. In the most recent meeting, several parents showed up in support of LGBTQ+ books and books by and about people of color. But the most disturbing part of the story isn't the complaints about books. It's adult who tried to break into the school to take photos of the school library.

"Last month, you heard from someone claiming pornographic books were in our media center, and that she denied being able to come into the school and prove that those books were there. That statement is partially true. The two books aren't owned by TMS, and aren't in our media center. The truth in that statement was she was denied to come into the school, and I will continue to do that," said [Principal Bryan Paslay, following the board's public comment period](#) in March. "We will deny entry into our school to random people calling in to say 'I want to go take pictures in your library.' They say they are doing this for the rights of all parents. Well, the parents of Troutman Middle School would be here causing a much bigger ruckus and scene if I just let any and everybody into that school."

That adult, Paula Mimnaugh, is a former teacher in the county but has no children in the district. She was aghast she was not allowed to [just enter the school library and look for books](#).

The two books she was most concerned with were *Almost Perfect* by Brian Katcher and *Another Day* by David Levithan. Mimnaugh has been a staple at Iredell School Board meetings [since last summer](#). She proudly wears a Moms For Liberty shirt, and she's shown up at other school board meetings in her area. At one, [she tied wearing masks to Marxism](#).

Paslay added that in addition to parents trying to break into the school, they've flooded the school with harassing phone calls. They saw something on social media about books in the library and would not take the school's word that the books were not in the collection. The calls did not end until the school threatened to get the police involved.

It seems an adult trying to get into a school or choosing to waste a school's time with phone calls is more of a disturbance than the books. More, it's an invasion of student privacy to take photos inside a school, even if that wasn't the "intent."

Participation in groupthink isn't something most people do intentionally. And yet, so quickly have people flocked to groups like Moms For Liberty, Turning Point USA, and local-level "parents rights" organizations. These people show up to school board meetings wearing their associations on their shirts, feeling a sense of connection among people in an era of disconnection, and faithfully following others to fight against the topic du jour (masks, vaccines, anti-CRT, anti-SEL, anti-comprehensive sex education, books they don't like). They're doing this with a sense of pride -- a sense of heroism -- at defending their rights against indoctrination.

But as much as they parrot the words liberty and freedom and rights, aside from the obvious use of their children as political tools in a cultural war -- that very same cancel culture these groups rail against -- one thing these heroes fail to do is be the heroes their kids need them to be.

Breaking into a school is a crime. Stealing is criminal. Brandishing a dildo, grandstanding at school board meetings, flooding administration with unfounded threats of fighting their surety bonds, parading people to those sitting in front of a room to deliver lawsuits, whether real or not, are not only immature acts, in some cases, they're terrorism. The same people fixated on defining words in their arguments dodge that one. But it's terrorism to intimidate people with physical or property violence to coerce them. These spectacles, despite the disclaimers put before them, are still done in front of children, in front of the same impressionable minds and eyes that are purportedly in need of protection.

Book banners are not standing for something they believe in. They're falling for what they've been told. Parents have always had rights. But it took a pandemic, it took putting a minute into the lives of children, to convince them they did not. Now, they're scrambling (with the help of money and right-wing connections) to become the heroes they could have been all along: people who were engaged with their children, their schools, and their communities, in proactive ways.

Hero syndrome is yet another tactic in the [white supremacy playbook](#).

It's far more important we demand student rights, including the right to attend a school without worry their [teachers may be removed](#) for talking about actual American history, without fear that the school administration may be attacked, and without anxiety about strangers who want to barge into their schools to take photos.

## You Need To Talk About The Sex Parts in Banned Books

Kelly Jensen

In yet another ill-planned publicity stunt by a democratic elected official, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot — who [did not step](#) in to help Chicago Public Library workers [during the pandemic](#) — posted a [photo of herself](#) reading a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Houston's Brazos Bookstore.

Behind her are several other books that have seen book challenges or outright bans in the last year, including Melissa (formerly *George*), *Let's Talk About Love*, *Go With the Flow*, and more. Right-wing media seized this opportunity to call hypocrisy, much as they did when [California's Governor Newsom](#) posed with a pile of banned books. Though he held *Beloved*, the media focused again on the carefully-placed copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, noting that Lee's classic has been "banned" in several blue states.

Both publicity stunts did a good job once again confusing the public about the [difference between a book ban and a curriculum update](#). While *To Kill a Mockingbird* has indeed been challenged and banned, the qualifier that it's been banned in blue states is a conscious effort by right-wing banners to suggest that a book by a white woman about racism being replaced by books by Black authors who experience the true effects of racism is revoking free speech and freedom to read. As much as there is to dig into this willful misrepresentation, the real issue worth addressing here is how many public figures in speaking out against book bans refuse to engage with the issues of sex and gender (and indeed, race as well).

Among the most banned books in the past year are those which highlight sex, sexuality, and gender. PEN America's report on [book bans in US schools](#) shows that queer characters and topics of sexuality are two of the biggest reasons a book is banned, falling right after books with protagonists of color. These categories, of course, overlap significantly, as seen through the books the American Library Association identified as [the most challenged in 2021](#).

It is far too easy and clean to highlight the importance of "classics" like *To Kill a Mockingbird* in your advocacy, whether you're a public official or not. It's hard for the average person, who likely read the book in their own school years, to not be outraged about a beloved book being pulled, whether or not Lee's book is **actually** the target of book bans.

Moreover, by focusing on a classic like Lee's, we're avoiding having vital and life-saving conversations about sex and sexuality. In an era where entire states seek to [erase the human experience](#) through legislation like "Don't Say Gay" in Florida and where educators and students are told that their rights don't exist and their jobs are on the line for simply being who they are, ignoring sex, sexuality, and gender is a major oversight.

Because it's not just "Critical Race Theory" and "Social Emotional Learning" that the right sees as the enemy. Comprehensive Sex Education (CSL) is the third in their triangle of targets. By

pushing for the continued removal of comprehensive sex education in schools — which has led to the uptick of books like *It's Perfectly Normal* being [splashed across censorship groups](#) with images of an individual with a mirror looking at her vulva and anus as she seeks to understand *all of* the parts of her biological body — the thought is there will be no discussions of sex, gender, or sexuality anywhere but in the home. This means an education that not only may have an agenda but may be factually incorrect, damaging, and create life-long harm and fear around pleasure.

CSL is the scientifically-backed alternative to combating issues that emerge with abstinence-only education. [CSL has been linked](#) to reductions in sexual activity, risky sexual activities, sexually transmitted infections, and adolescent pregnancy (this information is from the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, an authority on sexual behavior and health, among other things). [Three decades of research](#), when analyzed by professionals in the Journal of Adolescent Health, show CSL and its focus on a broad range of sexual and gender related education had major benefits for adolescents and that it should be broadly adapted in educational systems.

"[Grooming](#)" has been the word du jour from the right. Groups like [Moms For Liberty](#) find passages in titles like *Gender Queer* and [pull them out of context](#) in order to prove their ill-founded theories that [public education is indoctrinating children](#). In the top 10 books challenged in 2021, *Gender Queer* was named because of a couple of brief moments where there is a dream sequence by a legal adult wherein Maia fantasizes about their first experience having queer sex. It is developmentally appropriate and it is representative of what queer individuals can experience the first time they dare allow themselves to think with desire — something that is chemically created and controlled in our bodies and brains.

In *Out of Darkness*, there is an anal sex scene. This scene isn't about pleasure. It's about how the main character, a Mexican American, is reduced to objectification. It is embedded in the story's setting, its time frame, and its understanding of how brown bodies are seen as tools to be used by an oppressor. This happened. This happens.

*Beloved*? A depiction of brutal rape.

Both *Out of Darkness* and *Beloved* describe sexual crimes, both of which go uncharged in the text because they happen to marginalized bodies. Crimes that, were they to happen to white bodies, would be seen differently by these right-wing groups (debatably, of course — if these crimes were done by Nice White Boys With Futures On The Line, they'd likely still be challenged).

*Beyond Magenta* and *This Book Is Gay* celebrate queer identities and allow queer voices to be seen and heard. They speak to the fact gender and sexuality are complex and are life-long processes of understanding and breaking apart socially-created norms and structures. The self-same structures, of course, that right-wing censors seek to uphold through legislation based on selective reading of the Bible.

*Lawn Boy*? Sex happens in the book between two kids and it happens to a young boy who grows up thinking about what that experience meant for his sense of self through adolescence and early adulthood. The main character is working class and this sexual encounter at age 10 impacts the way he looks at and approaches the world, much as it would any individual with similar life stories.

*All Boys Aren't Blue*? Sex, gender, and sexuality. Johnson's memoir — his true, lived experiences — includes discussion of sexual assault, explored further in the author's followup memoir.....which, interestingly, has not seen the same assault by censors.

Lee's book about a white savior offers none of the above. There's no author of color, and there's certainly not sex, sexuality, or gender to discuss. While the trail in the book is about rape, there is zero depiction of the realities of rape in the book. It is easier to accept rape conceptually as "bad," but books that put it on the page and explore the long-lasting impact of an unwanted sex act, particularly as it relates to dehumanizing a non-cis, straight, white body, **show** why it's bad.

We need to be talking about the sex parts and the gender parts of the books being challenged. Those with the platforms to do good work against book bannings need to be versed not just in the easy-to-reach-for classics but the harder books. The books that hold up a mirror and a window to readers in today's society. The books that, for young readers, offer insight into who they are and what the world around them really looks like. You can ban discussions of LGBTQ people in the classroom but that doesn't stop LGBTQ individuals from being inside those same rooms. It simply puts yet another barrier into their lives.

American culture is a prude culture. We're afraid to talk about the messy and complex stuff. We refuse to engage with accurate terminology for human anatomy and human chemistry. It is much easier to accept violence on a mass scale as just the cost of being a person in the US than it is to accept that a child might be queer and deserves to read about people like them. That indeed, they may see a picture of sex between two individuals with the same body parts depicted in a book meant to be for sexual education — yet somehow, it's perceived as okay to lie to children about "the stork" bringing "a baby," rather than explain that a baby is created when an egg and a sperm meet.

Until more people are willing to talk about the sex stuff, we're not going to be moving this conversation forward. We'll continue to cling to puritanical ideals and fail to put an end to book bans and intellectual freedom.

Especially if when a leader **does** highlight a book with sex in it, [they're suddenly disappeared from their job for weeks](#).

# How To Fight Censorship

# How To Fight Book Bans and Challenges: An Anti-Censorship Tool Kit

Kelly Jensen

Book challenges aren't new, and neither is the "celebration" of banned books which occurs for a week at the end of September each year. The annual event began in 1982 as a response to a "sudden surge" of book challenges in schools and libraries, and one of the most well-known outcomes of [Banned Books Week](#) is the release of the prior year's "most challenged" books. These titles emerge from the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, who compile the media reports and librarian/teacher submissions of challenged books. The list makes a splash, most notably in recent years for how clear it is that queer books and books by authors of color, as well as books about sexual health, are under fire.

But when Banned Books Week ends, so often, too, does the energy of [highlighting book challenges and censorship](#). In too many cases, the "celebration" leans heavily into talking about the books in specifics — a particular title was challenged or removed from a classroom because of a specific reason, which is then repackaged in media stories to make it sound as though the people behind these challenges are a minority, oddballs, conspiracy theorists, or simply the kind of people who are afraid their children might be exposed to queer or Black characters.

This is an oversimplification. The lack of nuance only furthers the real threats to intellectual freedom.

Censorship happens when a group or organization works to [suppress speech, books, movies, and other materials](#). This is too often the sole focus on events like Banned Books Week, and the attention gets turned onto the censors and their agenda, as opposed to the real freedom under attack. That attention then further fuels their fire and provides the spark for more fires to ignite, as that attention is a commodity these groups crave. It is in no way about fear of their children learning about groups different than them. It's about white supremacy. It's about power. Calling it anything less than that diminishes the responsibility there is on gatekeepers to uphold intellectual freedom and the First Amendment.

Censorship *also* happens, though, when materials never get the opportunity to be included in a collection. This quiet or silent censorship is insidious and dangerous, and it emerges in two distinct ways. The first is when a librarian or educator purposefully doesn't include material in their collections because it counters their own beliefs. The second is when those gatekeepers elect not to purchase or promote materials *because of the fear* they may be challenged. A book that may be an essential addition to shelves never gets purchased because the person in charge of making said purchase bows to fear or intimidation or the possibility of either.

This censorship is not recorded.

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Since 2004, over [one quarter of U.S. newspapers](#) have disappeared. Many citizens may not see the problem with this as digital media has filled in many of the gaps. But digital media is not the same as local media, and for communities without local newspapers, this means communities are also left without an unbiased resource for understanding what's going on in their backyard.

Newspapers are watchdogs, historically [serving as a check-and-balance to civil organizations](#). Reporters showed up to board meetings across their communities and reported on the happenings. In most cases, this isn't especially noteworthy work; it's a beat. But those beat reporters give community members all of the information they may need before casting a ballot, before showing up to speak out against new town proposals, before showing up to a school board meeting, and so forth. Local journalists know the town they're covering, usually because they live there or are deeply embedded within the community.

With diminishing local news outlets comes the disappearance of local reporting. No longer is someone sitting at every board meeting to report on what's happening; no longer is there that check-and-balance system to report the conversations happening both by elected and appointed officials and those within the community who show up.

It isn't until there's a particularly salacious local story — think [pink dildos](#) or an unhinged [rant about anal sex](#) — or until a group shouts loud enough — think [high school students protesting](#) — that it makes any sort of news. Then, it might hit local news. In the linked pieces, the stories were juicy enough to make major outlets, seeing the opportunity for the click-outrage-share cycle. It is not that the writers don't care about these issues. Most of them are deeply disturbed. But, until the story can pay for its space by means of clicks, it isn't worthy.

It's white supremacy and power which drive those click-y stories. Those stories then repeat themselves in other communities.

The click economy is a major factor in the decline of [local journalism](#), and it's also why you don't hear about the tremendous number of censorship stories happening on the local level every single day across America. Where there were once reporters or citizens sitting at civic meetings to see and share what's happening, now those seats are empty and the stories go unheard.

That doesn't mean those in the community don't know what's going on. Indeed, when it comes to librarians and teachers, it's likely they know not only what's going on, but also the rumors about what's happening. They're aware of groups showing up to school or library board meetings to challenge policies or curriculum or collections. They're hearing about what those groups plan to continue to do to pursue their agenda. They may be hearing from individuals dogging board members to bow to pressure to remove a title from a library shelf.

Without support — and indeed, the local media is a tool of support in communities, particularly in their roles as watchdogs — it's impossible to overstate how easy gatekeepers can fold to that pressure. They may or may not have supportive administration, but in either case, knowing a



choice you make for your community may put your job in jeopardy can and does too easily mean that choice simply isn't made.

Celebrating banned books ignores the vital need to protect intellectual freedom. It fails to account for the very real humans whose livelihoods are at stake for doing what's right. Instead, it further serves white supremacy and power, centering the voices of outrage, rather than those whose voices have been forgotten, ignored, or suppressed completely.

Take, for example, what happened in Irving, Texas. A far-right Christian group [formally challenged](#) the book [Jack of Hearts \(and Other Parts\)](#) by Lev Rosen in the summer of 2021. Formally is important here. Norman and her compatriots have been showing up to school and city board meetings for nearly two years to challenge queer materials in Irving Public Library.

No local media covered the summer formal challenge, despite the fact that Irving is a large suburb in the Dallas metroplex.

*Jack of Hearts* went through the library's challenge process and remains on shelves in the public library. This is thanks to a supportive city council, as well as a strong leadership team at the library who not only believe in the power of queer books like this, but who fiercely defend the right for all of their citizens to have access to as wide a range of materials as possible.

What hasn't been reported, though, is that Norman and her group **continued to show up to city council meetings afterwards**. Each of the meetings where they came was a parade of more and more unhinged comments from "concerned citizens," demanding the council do something about the books in the library.

It also hasn't been reported that *Jack of Hearts* is not available in the Irving Independent School District.

Norman is an employee in the district.

It's unknown whether the book was available in the school libraries prior to the litany of complaints. But certainly, school libraries operate differently than public libraries in so much that they do serve in loco parentis. Where public libraries put the onus on parents to monitor what their children consume — as they should — school libraries have more responsibility for maintaining appropriate collections for the students they serve.

*Jack of Hearts* is for readers 14 and up, with a range of positive book reviews from trusted sources. The book is appropriate for the school library, with supporting evidence, but it was either pulled or never given the chance to be on shelves at all. With groups like the one pressuring the public library, it's hard to blame a school library for not wanting to fight that battle, despite the fact that is the job.

Without local media on this beat, the story disappears from public view. Out of sight, out of mind.

But the challengers remain.

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It's a privilege to consider book bans a thing of the past or a thing that doesn't impact readers. It is easy to believe getting a book is as simple as a one-click at an online retailer. But it's not — and that mentality in and of itself is a product of white supremacist thinking. Book challenges and bans harm the most vulnerable in communities who don't have access to finances, time, or transportation to acquire a book no longer available to them in the places where they are: classrooms or libraries.

It's also a privilege to suggest book bans are great for authors and book sales. Sales increase for *some* authors, sure. But for the bulk of authors who experience book bans, there's no noticeable difference in sales because often, they don't even know a book has been challenged or pulled from shelves. No author writes with the hopes of gaining notoriety or sales by a book being inaccessible to its intended readership. They write to reach those readers.

What gets forgotten in discussions of censorship, too, is the incredible power of the public library. No other American institution is tasked with unequivocally protecting the First Amendment and intellectual freedom specifically. This isn't a politically negotiable assertion. Libraries are founded on and protect these liberties and need to continue to do so. It's not about banned books. It's about the rights imparted to American citizens as outlined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

So what can be done to push back against book challenges and bans? Without structures like local journalism to stay on the beat, how does the average citizen or average librarian, school librarian, or administrator stay abreast and work to ensure intellectual freedom remains a fundamental right? There are several potent tools and methods to engage with, whether you're able to dedicate a few minutes to the cause or lend hours of time to do the work. These lists are split up for citizens and for those inside libraries, but know that these are not mutually exclusive lists.

## Methods and Tools for Combatting Censorship in Your Community

### **For Citizens**

Begin first by keeping your local school board, library board, and city council's information handy. Where and when do they regularly meet? Where can you find the minutes from previous meetings? Know where to find agendas, as well as board packets — those packets may be made freely on the appropriate government website or you may need to put in a [Freedom of Information Request](#) for them (this is your right). Keep the phone numbers and email addresses

of each member of the representing boards accessible and updated. Many of these boards record their meetings, so bookmark those livestreams or archives.

All of these paper trails are resources granted to you by federal and local laws. Utilize them to know what's going on where you live.

Keep up with your local newspaper if you have one. If you don't have one, learn who covers your community for regional papers or national bureaus. Even mainstream, major outlets like Business Insider or ProPublica have reporters assigned to different regions of the country. The problem is, of course, they're covering a large region, rather than a single community or county. These reporters are, however, always seeking the stories that matter, so utilize them as resources.

After you've familiarized yourself with that information, here are some more specific ways to fight censorship in your community:

- **Vote.** Yes, it's as simple and straightforward as this to get started. Local elections matter, and in many places, library boards and school boards are elected positions. Know who is on the ballot and ask them questions at open forums or via their social media and websites. Ask them where they stand on censorship and the rights of a community to access the information they desire. [The Niles Public Library](#) serves as a stark reminder of what happens when turnout for local elections is minimal — the minority's voice is heard loudest.
- **Serve on a Board.** If you have the time, serve on your local [school, library, or city council/board](#). For appointed positions, apply; for elected positions, run. Every civil body operates differently, so get to know how these positions work, how often you're expected to attend meetings, and what your role may be in the broader community.
- **Show Up to Meetings and Speak.** Open comments from the public are given space at civic meetings. Typically, this is time at the start of a meeting, and often, there's a time limit on open comment. It varies community to community and board to board. This is crucial because people who have a problem are the ones who always show up. People who are happy or unaware of how things are going do not show up. Your comments do not need to be scripted or deep. Simply taking ten minutes of your evening to show up and tell the council you're happy with how the library has such a great collection or that the children's programming in the school library has been appreciated is doing the work. Those comments not only remind gatekeepers of the power of their job, but those boards hear and see that, too.
- **Write Letters.** Can't show up to meetings? That's fine — email your city council, email your library's administration, and email the school librarian. Tell them you love what they're doing and why. These letters matter, and even if your letter is handed to the library worker shelving books because you don't know who best to direct it to, the letter will show up in board packets and reports, as proof of the vitality of the organization and how it serves its community.

- **Talk to the Newspaper.** Maybe, if you're lucky, you have local newspapers. Utilize them. Write letters to the editor — which are often capped at 300 or so words — extolling the virtues of the library. Name names, name book titles, name programs. Again: the majority of voices on those letters to the editor page are unhappy people. They rarely are people who are happy. Add a voice of praise and do it often. It's as simple as setting a quarterly or monthly alert to spend five minutes brainstorming praise, writing it, and sending it through the paper's submissions, often right on their digital editions.
- **Correct Misinformation.** Taking into account the above, speak out and write in when misinformation about your library, its materials, or its actions are shared. In Irving, one of the angles of challenge for queer books was that the YA section was nothing but LGBTQ+ sex books and there were no books about other topics in the library. This was patently untrue: the library had books on every topic claimed to be lacking, and the YA section is packed with books on every topic imaginable, for readers of all age levels and tastes. This misinformation is what many will latch on to and use as a means of denigrating the library and its work, then it is wielded to fit the white supremacist agenda.
- **Familiarize Yourself With a Library's Collection Development Policy.** All public libraries and most, if not all, school libraries have collection development policies. Often, they're available on their websites. These policies govern how and why materials are acquired for a collection. Keep these handy and be familiar with them, as these are tools helpful for combatting censorship — and encourage your libraries to make these policies accessible online, as well as kept regularly updated. If there's something amiss in the policy, ask questions.
- **Submit Materials Requests.** Most public libraries allow users to submit titles for the collection. Let your library know you want books by authors of color and queer authors. Your request can be as simple as the name and title or as in-depth as name and title, as well as why the book should be in the collection (and you can absolutely include reviews, if you want). Submitting requests makes it clear to purchasers these materials are desired and allows a paper trail to exist as evidence of this community need.
- **Ask Why Items Are Not Purchased.** Is there a book you've requested or have seen in other libraries that is absent in yours? Ask why. There might be a legitimate reason for this — budget constraints, for example, limit how many books can be purchased in a fiscal year — but the act of questioning may be the wakeup call a staff member needs to pause and reflect on their own biases and fears. Again: public libraries are tasked with protecting intellectual freedom. You've got a right to ask why those freedoms aren't always exercised within the institution.
- **Report Hate Groups.** Contact local media and local authorities about hate groups when they emerge. These groups work to target policies they don't like with the goal of maintaining white supremacy. Call them out on social media, then follow it up with evidence of hateful actions where you can. This is standing up in support of libraries, of intellectual freedom, and of the First Amendment.
- **Stay Alert.** Distraction is harmful. Too often, we forget about a problem or an issue when it feels like it's been resolved. The fact is, protecting Intellectual Freedom is every day work. It doesn't end, and it doesn't magically resolve itself. Keep alert, keep fighting, and keep finding more allies for the cause in your community. Show up together.

- **Donate Money.** Have some money you can donate to the library? Do it. Go through their Friends group or Foundation, if they have one, or simply ask if they have a donation spot on their website where you can leave some money. Even a few dollars will be stretched and put to tremendous use.

Do not take for granted the freedoms given to you. The fact is, those working to actively censor material are working to take them away. We're living through historical times and they mirror previous generations of "historical times": white supremacists are working to limit access and control the information made available to citizens. They're denying the existence of people of color and queer people by working to remove these materials. Public libraries have and will continue to do great work with building necessary collections representing a diversity of viewpoints, upholding their roles in the country. But those who seek power and control don't want that to be the case, and in too many cases, libraries back down in order to not cause a stir (in and of itself an issue with the stereotypes and impressions of who works in a library made more damaging with the loss of local media to prove otherwise).

For Gatekeepers (Educators, Librarians, Administrators)

Libraries have incredible responsibility, as do teachers, though the regulations within the classroom are far more politically limiting than in public libraries. The bulk of people working in these institutions are doing their best, and they're doing so with little support vocalized from the community, compared to the criticism.

Remember your purpose as a radical institution devoted to upholding the fundamental rights of citizens. You are the bastion of intellectual freedom. It doesn't matter what that looks like — children's puppet story times, crime lover book clubs, ditching late fees, whatever — these are all part and parcel of what makes the library the institution that it is. It is a third space where anyone can exist without any purpose. The library *is* the purpose.

In addition to all of the above items, some specific tools for gatekeepers to combat censorship include:

- **Have a Formal Review Process.** Update or rework your current materials review process and align it with your purpose as an institution of intellectual freedom. Explain where and how items are added to the collection, as well as how items recommended by citizens are included. Put this on your website and make it readily accessible, right alongside your forms for formal material complaints and forms for suggesting materials.
- **Market Those Materials.** Put it on your front doors that the library is an institution of intellectual freedom. Promote that you have these policies. Book displays are part of the work of a library, as are reader's advisory guides. So, too, should be your marketing of what it is you truly *do* in the library.
- **Consider Ditching Celebrations of Banned Books Week.** Rebrand the concept as Intellectual Freedom Week or a week dedicated to protecting the First Amendment. Get rid of the week-long festival all together and focus instead on working these issues into

everyday discourse as Intellectual Freedom or, to put an even finer point on it, upholding the First Amendment rights *guaranteed* to all U.S. citizens. By highlighting banned or challenged books, you give more attention to those who want to uphold white supremacist ideals, even if the intention is to showcase the books. Just put the books on displays all year long. Make those displays when it's unexpected and give it a non-Banned Books theme. Get all of this in front of your citizens all the time, rather than the one time it's seen as the "right" time.

- **Befriend the Media.** Talk to your local news. Talk to regional news. Talk to national news. Get beyond talking with library-specific organizations — they don't need to be convinced about libraries or intellectual freedom (even if they do need to be convinced to change the language they're using). These outlets are your supporters and your allies in defending the First Amendment.
- **Recognize Your Staff in Meaningful Ways.** Remind them you're supportive of them because they're professionals hired for their skills, talent, and intellect to do their jobs. Kudos do good, but raise those kudos to the level of your library board, as well as city council. Then make spaces where staff feel they can go when necessary. Do they need a few therapy sessions when dealing with a community book challenge? Do what you can to provide that. Do they need flex time or the ability to do some of their work from a non-library space? Make it happen. And don't just make these things happen. Talk about why these decisions are made so that everyone understands that these accommodations are necessary to do the tremendous job of upholding intellectual freedom.
- **Ask Questions and Be Open to Questions.** Know why books aren't being purchased. Be prepared to be asked about the books which are purchased. It should be an expectation of those in charge of working in places of intellectual pursuit to expect engagement on their choices and likewise, feel supported — or challenged! — on them.

Don't fall asleep. It's easy to become complicit, especially during busy seasons. But it's during these times those who wish to dismantle public institutions gain ground, recruit members with their ideologies and propaganda, and act as a group or individuals to tear things apart.

Constant vigilance is exhausting, but if freedom of information and access to ideas is foundational to you, the work is essential.

# A Template for Talking with School and Library Boards About Book Bans

Kelly Jensen

I received incredible [responses to a survey](#) on what tools and information would be helpful for fighting back against book bans, and one thing that popped up was having quick templates and guides to action for folks who want to do something but don't know where to begin. Let's look at how to talk at school board and library board meetings. There is a downloadable template included, as well as a shareable graphic for social media.

## Why Talk at a School or Library Board Meeting

Every public school and library board meeting provides time for citizens to speak what's on their mind, whether or not it is an agenda item. Depending on the municipality, this might be two minutes or up to five minutes. Right now, right-wing groups are utilizing this public address time to challenge books they don't like, sometimes doing little more than reading passages from the books in question to fill the time.

## How to Talk at a School or Library Board Meeting

All board meetings must have an agenda posted in advance. This might happen on their websites and/or on the public announcements space in the facility (for example: my local public library posts their agendas on the outer doors of the building, as well as online). There is likely a contact form or address on these agendas that asks if you'd like to make a public comment. You need to be in touch in advance--they will give you a timeframe, usually 24-48 hours prior to the meeting--to get on the public comment time. They do this not to screen comments but to allot enough time for everyone.

You can do this for each and every meeting. The more you show up, the more your voice and the voices of those like yours are represented.

## What to Say at a School or Library Board Meeting

What you say is important, but it's not more important than showing up to talk. If what you want to say is as simple as "Thank you for having queer books available in the library for all ages," that is as important as a longer comment naming specific titles or citing research on the value of such books in a collection.

- [Here is an example of a longer speech given at a public library board meeting](#). Although the outcome of the broader story is still underway, the speech itself is an outstanding example of pulling in research and naming specific reasons why banning books doesn't serve a whole community.
- Here is an excellent example of [how people showing up in support of a library's decision](#)--in this case to have Pride displays--outweighs those who come to complain.

- Here's another excellent "what to do when" related [specifically to Pride displays](#), but this is applicable for any topic, including social justice, race, and those similarly challenged.

If you don't show up to talk, know that other people are talking for you. In many communities--conservative or not--groups like Moms For Liberty claim they speak on behalf of all parents, but that is far from the truth. No one gets to speak for you except you.

### **What To Do If You Can't Come to a School or Library Board Meeting**

There are a host of valid reasons why you may not be able to make a library board meeting in person or virtually. If you can't show up, that's okay--writing letters is as important and as powerful.

Letters sent to boards are included in their board packets, meaning that the board will see the letters sent to them or for them. Often, packets are made available in advance of a meeting, so you'll want to time your letter to hit a week or so before the meeting to get into the current packet.

Much like public comment time matters because it is time allotted for hearing from the citizens of a community, so too are letters. They do not need to be long or in depth. Again, a short "thank you for having this" can go miles.

### **Sample Script for School and Library Board Comments**

[You can download this template here in the form of a Google Doc](#). Adapt to fit your needs, whether you are speaking in person or writing a letter.

Dear Board Members:

My name is [fill in the blank] and I am a resident of [your community]. I want to take the time to thank our great [name your library/school] for providing a wide range of materials to our diverse community. Tax money spent to represent the whole of a community is money well spent.

[Space here to elaborate on specific titles or types of books, i.e., Having books like *Gender Queer* in the high school library ensures that students learn and experience what it is to question one's gender identity. You may like to [cite research](#) on how access to such books is developmentally appropriate and has psychological benefits.]

[Alternately, use this space to talk about book displays you've seen across the library or lists you've seen and utilized on their website or social media presence. Example: Seeing the Pride book displays in the library helped me/my child be seen and/or helped me find new and excellent books to read I may have otherwise not found on my own.]



In an era of restricting ideas and a time when book bans continue to be on the rise [you may like [citing research from PEN America](#) here] from a small but vocal minority, I speak on behalf of the First Amendment rights of students and community members to access the materials they wish to. You have talented and competent professionals using their expertise to the best of their ability, and they deserve that recognition.

Thank you for your time.

[Include a signature if a letter].

### **Make Attending Meetings a Social Event**

If groups like Moms For Liberty make board meetings a social event, so, too, should those who oppose book bans and censorship. Here's how you can do that:

- Distribute meeting dates to your local friends, family, and social groups and all plan on showing up
- Decide to have a group of people speak back-to-back on censorship issues
- Bring young people to the meetings--your children seeing democracy in action, whether they choose to speak or not, is a powerful reminder of their rights. Be conscious of letting them know what they may hear, though, as it could be surprising the level of hate leveled at groups of which they may be part.
- Wear matching colors or create some kind of logo that unites all of you in your message. For example, [you could use this image](#) that makes clear no one else speaks for you on topics related to "parental rights" (saved as both an image and a .svg file). This logo would stand out on purple or black or gray tops.
- Record and photograph folks who go up to the mic to speak in support of First Amendment rights and share that on social media
- Share the below graphics and templates to amp up supporters who know they will be in like-minded, proactive company

### **Downloadable and Shareable Material**

All of these items are available to download and share across social media as appropriate. Credit is already listed on each image.

*Why it is important to show up to school and library board meetings:*

## Show Up + Speak at School/Library Board Meetings Against Censorship

No one else gets to speak for you

Positive feedback makes a difference

Note a library's value to a whole community

Highlight books, displays, programs doing good

Can't go in person? Write a letter!

It is your democratic right

bookriot.com

What to say during public comment time at school or library board meetings (applicable to letter writing, too):

## WHAT TO SAY AT A SCHOOL/LIBRARY BOARD MEETING

- *Introduce Yourself*
- *Thank the school/library for their hard work*
- *Name books, displays, and/or programs that are inclusive and promote diversity and why that is important (your own words and/or add research)*
- *Express gratitude for the expertise of educators and librarians and how this represents a whole community*
- *Mention the power of information access as upholding students' First Amendment rights*

**GRAB A CUSTOMIZABLE SCRIPT TEMPLATE HERE:  
TINYURL.COM/BOARD-TALK-SCRIPT**

*bookriot.com*

*What young people can do to combat book bans happening in their schools and libraries:*

## How Teens Can Challenge Book Bans

- Check out BIPOC/LGBTQ+ Books
- Attend school board meetings + talk
- Use social media to tell people about book bans (& connect with other teens who want to do something!)
- Become news savvy
- Contact your lawmakers and/or vote
- Shut down hate speech and misinformation
- Request books at your school/library
- Write your library board and advocate for books you love

**TO DO LIST**

Modified from "How to Fight Book Bans and Censorship Tool Kit" by Kelly Jensen/Book Riot  
(<https://bookriot.com/how-to-fight-book-bans-and-challenges/>)

## What Do School Boards Do?

Kelly Jensen

It continues to be true that school boards have become the [new target of right-wing activists](#), itching for more "parental rights" over curriculum, education, and information access in public schools. [Conservatives cheered](#) in Wisconsin as several party-aligned members were ushered into school board seats across the Milwaukee suburbs. In Flagler County, Florida, [every candidate for the school board](#) attended an event sponsored by [Moms For Liberty](#) to discuss their vision for the role were they to be elected to. In Durham County, North Carolina, where Democrats outnumber Republicans by healthy numbers, the school board election roster is [packed with conservative candidates](#).

School boards are by design nonpartisan\*, so this push for outspoken conservative candidates outlining their political agendas not only disrespects the purpose of boards but it undermines the value that school boards have for ensuring a school is [utilizing taxpayer money](#) to represent the *whole* of a community.

What does a school board do and what are their responsibilities? It's a little challenging to understand, especially during this era of unrepentant censorship and misinformation campaigns spearheaded by politically aligned candidates who purposefully want to change their purpose.

The history of the school board began when colonizers began holding town hall–style meetings in the first 13 states. School boards look different now, but the purpose is pretty much the same: to provide leadership, vision, and direction to the school and its administration. School boards typically hire the school superintendent and work in tandem with them and the rest of the district's leadership to update and craft policies and procedures, develop and approve the budget, and evaluate performance. What makes a board unique is that it cannot operate individually; it's the entire board who makes decisions, and a majority vote is what does or does not pass forth ideas.

In the U.S., school boards typically have between five and nine members, depending on the district's size and needs. They're often voted into their positions on rotating schedules, to ensure that new board members work alongside more seasoned ones. You might see three board seats up for election in one year, followed by four seats two years later.

Good boards, in addition to working collaboratively among one another and with the school administration, also hear from the community in which they serve. Let it be emphasized that means the entire community — not just those who are able to show up to a board meeting or coordinate a rally at said board meeting to be loud. Good board members also know they represent a team and not themselves on that board, meaning that board members who go rogue and post board or school business outside official meetings are not only creating a disturbance, but they're acting unethically.

School boards are not responsible for determining what each educator teaches in their individual classrooms. Many do have oversight on textbooks, but more often than not that's due to the budget requirements of a significant textbook purchase (and it gives parents their opportunity to review the texts, offer their feedback, and see where their tax money is going — rights they've always had). As the [Illinois Association of School Boards](#) notes, the difference between a school board and administration is that a school board *governs* while administration *manages*. Governing means offering strategic direction; managing means using that direction to create and implement action.

In other words, the school board has no authority on the day-to-day operation of the school. This includes having no say on how educators keep free reading materials in their classrooms, how librarians practice collection development according to their already-in-place policies, nor do they have the right to be the people [responsible for selecting books in the schools](#).

Be wary of candidates running on a platform, especially candidates running with the backing of political groups. If you have the interests of your whole community in mind, you don't need to identify an affiliation in order to run or find support.

If you've ever considered volunteering to ensure your school is providing the best it can to your community, give serious thought to getting involved. And if you can't, remember showing up to meetings matters, as does sending an email to members letting them know what you think should — or should not — be happening in your school. As splashy as it is to donate books to schools facing challenges, for example, that won't create the sort of long-term change necessary that showing up does. Just look at how right-wing groups have cannibalized meetings across the U.S. so strongly that board candidates are now attending their meetings to pitch themselves for election.

More interested in serving on a library board? That matters, too, and [here's why and how to do it](#).

\*In a small number of states and in some individual counties, boards *are* partisan. It's becoming more common as more right-leaning states [create new laws that allow counties to choose](#) whether or not to run their board elections with party affiliation.

## How to Run for School Board

Kelly Jensen

Curious what it looks like to run for school board? Wondering if now is your time to step up and help provide governance for your local education system? Let's dive in.

It's no secret that school board elections right now are crucial. It's also no secret that some school board candidates — even in nonpartisan elections — are being funded by [right-wing political action committees](#) to infuse the board with specific conservative agendas. Groups like Moms For Liberty run trainings across the country, hoping to get their agenda on the local level to further remove the voices of any non-white, non-straight, non-Christians from schools (and to help accelerate the process of [destroying public school funding](#) more broadly). While certainly these groups have money and people behind them, they do not speak on behalf of an entire community, and it is crucial that those with talent, passion, and an interest in serving **all** of a community, rather than a cherry-picked portion of it, put their name into the hat of serving on the local school board.

The following is applicable to most school boards in the US, but because no information is uniform across the country, spend a little time ensuring you know the steps and process for your municipality. Each state has an association of school boards, and those websites will be flush with updated information and insight into the rules specific to your location.

### How To Run for School Board

#### **Determining Eligibility and Time Commitment**

- Familiarize yourself with [what school boards do](#). It might sound silly to say that, but it is vital to know what you may or may not be able to do with a role on the board.
- Know when your next school board election is and how many seats will be up for election. Research the candidates in those seats currently to determine if you want to run against them or wait to run until another candidate's seat is available. In some cases, you may see an open seat you want to run for, but your residency does not meet the boundaries of that seat. Some are district wide "at large," meaning you represent the entire district and some come from specific limits within a community, meaning you'd represent a specific part of a community.
- Make sure you are eligible to run. Every state is different, but in general, you must be 18, have no felony convictions, are not employed by the district for which you're running, and you live in the district. Some states have educational requirements as well.
- Prepare to volunteer — most school board positions are unpaid. School boards are, by design, inequitable and thus, those without financial strains have more ability to serve.
- Know that you'll spend 15-20 hours a month, if not more, doing school board related work. Some state school board associations [clock that time much higher](#). School boards



are, by design, inequitable and thus, those without work, family, or extracurricular strains have more ability to serve.

## Qualities of Good School Board Candidates

Do some background reading into school boards and how they operate. [This survey by the National School Boards Association](#), conducted in 2018, offers a broad look at the state of school boards. It is obviously different now, but the groundwork there is good for giving you insight into what makes a good candidate.

- A strong commitment to the value, purpose, and goals of public education
- Desire to ensure **all** students within a school are served as equitably as possible
- Clear communication, desire to be transparent, and interest in hearing from **all** constituents within your area of representation
- A sense of justice, fairness, and willingness to consider all sides of an issue before speaking or voting
- Interest in leading, not managing, the district in its mission

## Filing Paperwork to Declare Candidacy

Each and every state will be slightly different, and things might differ on a county-by-county basis. Check with your county elections clerk to ensure you file all appropriate paperwork on time.

Among the most common paperwork:

- Official declaration of candidacy (which may include a filing fee)
- Financial disclosures (to ensure you're following campaign financing rules and avoiding conflicts of interest)
- Criminal history
- Nomination petitions

## Running a Campaign

It is tricky to offer a play by play here because it differs by community. In some places, it's still a challenge to get candidates to run for school board, so you may be running uncontested. According to [data from 2018](#) — which, we know this is a different time just a few years later — 75% of those who ran for school board spent \$1000 or less. There is no question that in some areas, particularly where well-funded PACs and "parental rights" groups are pouring money into campaigns and candidates, it might cost a lot more.

Know what campaign finance requirements are in your state. Many of these bigger organizations get around having to talk about how they are funding candidates because of their



status as a non-profit — and not all of these organizations have yet to file 990s, which would open up some information about that.

Your state school board association will provide information as well. A few state specific samples:

- [Get on board. Michigan](#)
- [4 Tips for Running a Smart School Board Campaign](#) (Texas School Board Association)
- [Becoming a School Board Member from Minnesota School Board Association](#)

The effort takes time and sometimes money. Get your name out there in person and online, and show you live the values you will bring to the board, including equity, care and commitment to the education of **all** students, and your belief in the power of public education. Take part in local candidate forums and be a staple at board meetings, even if you don't speak.

It's a lot of work, but it is yet another way to make a real impact on the lives of young people (and those who work with them or care about them). The more people who care about everyone in a community and desire to meet as many needs as possible through expanding education, rather than constricting it, the better the system flourishes and does precisely what it is meant to do.



# HOW TO RUN FOR SCHOOL BOARD

## DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY + TIME COMMITMENT

Do you meet the requirements and have up to 50 hours a month to volunteer?

## ASSESS YOUR FIT

Ensure you're committed to public education and serving the needs of your entire community, including those with whom you don't agree.

## FILE THE PAPERWORK

This might include an official declaration of candidacy, financial disclosures, criminal history, and in some localities, a petition.

## RUN YOUR CAMPAIGN

Most campaigns for school board are small budget, and state school board associations often provide ideas for successful campaigning.

## FOR MORE INFO + RESOURCES:

[BOOKRIOT.COM/HOW-TO-RUN-FOR-SCHOOL-BOARD](http://BOOKRIOT.COM/HOW-TO-RUN-FOR-SCHOOL-BOARD)

## Why You Should Sit on Your Library Board

Tirzah Price

Most of us understand that our public libraries in the United States are funded by tax dollars and staffed by trained librarians, who take care of the day-to-day tasks of running a library and planning for the future. But who has a say in library policy, budgeting, and the direction of a public library? That would be your library's board of trustees, who ideally represent the community that your library serves (also known as stakeholders). Who they are and what they do for the community should be something that all citizens and library users are aware of because, while they might not work in your public library, they can have a big impact on how it is run.

### What Does a Library Board Member Or Trustee Do?

I asked Cathy Johnson, board member of my hometown library Big Rapids Community Library, what she believes is the role of the library board, and she said: "A library board member is, at the core of the job, an advocate for the library and its mission." What that encompasses can be anything and everything from creating policies for the library, deciding on capital improvements, determining budget, responding to community input (and challenges), hiring the library director who then oversees staff and implementation of library policies, and ensuring that the library's mission is being accomplished.

The nuts and bolts of this will vary from library to library, and may depend on how your library works with your local government. But generally speaking, as a library board member or trustee, you can expect to attend one library board meeting per month (at minimum, but you might be required to attend other emergency meetings). You might want to brush up on *Robert's Rules of Order*, and you have to be willing to understand how your local library functions. When I asked Tegan Beese, MLIS and Youth Services Consultant at the State Library of Iowa, what makes a good library board member, she responded: "It is important that they fully understand the library's involvement in the community, that it's more than just books."

Libraries offer essential services including but not limited to technology access, internet, literacy programs for all ages, events and programming, community outreach, and circulating materials beyond books that include [movies, tech, and even tools](#). It's also important that you understand that library staff doesn't just shelve books and check them in and out — they create and run events and develop programs to serve a wide range of community members. They must also be able to respond to the needs of the community, sometimes rather quickly (as in the case of COVID-19 impacting libraries very suddenly, requiring new policies to be written and implemented). Library board members need to understand not just the general role of libraries in today's society, but they need to understand how their own individual libraries function, who they serve, and what programs they offer. Not every board member needs to be an expert, but they need to have a general awareness of what their library offers and be open to learning from the staff.

A good board member is also willing to do their research, follow the policies and bylaws set forth by the library board, and support equality and access for all — that last one may seem obvious, but it's probably the most important point of all. An understanding of library law and finance might not be your strong suit, but many state libraries offer courses and symposiums that help board members get up to speed on important issues impacting libraries (anything from how state aid money can be used to whether or not your library can prohibit guns in their building!), so a willingness to attend such educational events and learn more is also an important quality in a potential board member. The American Library Association also has [further tips and continuing education opportunities](#) for those interested in getting involved in their library board.

## Who Can Be a Library Board Member Or Trustee? How Do I Get Involved?

You understand the responsibilities, and now you want to get started. How do you go about becoming a board member? Anyone residing within the service area of their public library who meets the qualifications set forth by their local government can be considered for a position on their library board. The qualifications and process may differ according to the type of library your community has and how it's set up to work with local government.

The first thing you'll want to do is discern whether your public library is a city, county, or district library. That is something your library can tell you, if you're not certain. I also recommend reading the minutes of your library board meetings, which by law must be publicly posted, usually on the library's website. By perusing these minutes, you'll get a sense for who is involved, what issues they discuss, and how meetings are structured. It might also help to attend a meeting (which are open to the public, by law), as long as you go with the purpose to listen and observe, and only weigh in when it is appropriate to do so. Meeting agendas are usually made available 24 hours in advance of a meeting, so you can see what is being discussed and when input from the general public is allowed.

Many libraries are tied to a city or county, and you may find applications to sit on a library board on their websites. A quick Google search of "library board application" and my current town brought me to the application on my city's website. If you receive notices from your city or county, you might also notice open calls for library board position applications. Be aware that a library board has a set number of members, and term limits, so you might not be able to start right after applying — but filling out an application is a good place to start.

Some boards appoint members from the applications they receive throughout the year. Some board members must be elected. Some are appointed by your local government's commission or supervisory board. Information about how your local library functions can be found online, or you can ask your local librarian. It might not be a fast process — I know someone who waited two years from applying to being appointed to the board — but it's likely that if you make your interest known, you will be welcomed.

## Why Is Getting Involved With Your Library Board Important?

Getting involved in your library board is important because the system requires informed, passionate individuals who care about library services in order for the system to not just work, but thrive. Unfortunately, individuals who don't understand the role and purpose of libraries or don't care about the essential services that libraries provide can wreak a lot of havoc if they're appointed to a library board. While some boards do have more power than others, library board members have a direct impact on how the library functions. Just look to [Niles Public Library and the destructive, draconian measures their uninformed board has enacted](#), drastically slashing budgets and services at the expense of the people of Niles, Illinois. And sadly, Niles Public Library isn't the only library to be gutted by an uncaring board. It can happen anywhere, which is why citizens should pay attention to what happens in their library board meetings, even if they aren't sitting on the board.

"Serving as a member of a local board is something every citizen should consider," says Johnson, who believes that doing so is a good way to give back to your community. But given what we've seen happen in Niles, I would argue that supporting and serving on your library board is essential for all book lovers who want to see their libraries succeed and flourish.

# How to Contact Your Legislators About Book Bans (And Why it Matters)

Susie Dumond

If you've been paying attention to local and national news, you've probably noticed a notable uptick in censorship and book banning. This has been a coordinated effort at the school district, library, community, and state level primarily targeting LGBTQ+ books and books by BIPOC authors. It's a deeply concerning trend, especially as we're seeing these bans instigated by politicians and local legislators, rather than from individual parents of students, as has largely been the case for book challenges in the past. If you're an advocate for free speech and open access to information and books of all kinds, then now is the time to speak out and contact your legislators and local school board. Your voice is especially needed if you live in an area where book bans are being actively considered or have recently passed. In this guide, I'll provide the information you need to research the issue in your area and tips for how to contact your legislators about book bans. I also hope to explain why your voice is important for fighting censorship.

PEN America, an organization dedicated to human rights and freedom of expression in literature, recently published an [in-depth report on the rise in book bans](#). They found that, between July 2021 and March 2022, 86 school districts across 26 states banned titles, impacting over 2 million students. Of the over 1,100 books singled out in these bans, 41% star BIPOC characters, 22% directly address race or racism, and 33% include LGBTQ+ themes or characters. At Book Riot, we've been working hard to keep readers up-to-date on [censorship news](#) and [concerning trends](#) for libraries and schools. But the most impactful way to fight book bans is grassroots advocacy from constituents who live in the area and can speak to why censorship hurts their community.

## Why Your Voice Matters

Let's be real for a moment: Sometimes it feels like your opinion can't possibly make a difference, especially to lawmakers who fundamentally disagree with you. But the truth is that a required part of lawmakers' jobs is listening to their constituents' concerns. After all, without constituents, they wouldn't have their jobs in the first place! Most legislators have systems of logging and tracking how many constituents contact them about specific issues, usually with a tally of communications for and against certain bills. Even if it feels like your letter or call might be meaningless, it's being recorded. And while it's true that your one request might not change a legislator's opinion overnight, you might be surprised by how much of an impact it makes.

I grew up in Arkansas and Oklahoma, and I voted on the opposite side of most issues in those very red states. Although I always showed up for elections, I never felt like my voice could make much of a difference. As a liberal, queer woman, I often figured my legislators didn't even want me in their state, much less cared about my opinions. But I later moved to Washington, D.C., to study public policy and worked professionally in grassroots advocacy for six years. In that time, I learned that constituent communication is *hugely* important to shaping policy, even if it doesn't

always look that way from the outside. In annual surveys from the [Congressional Management Foundation](#), over 90% of Capitol Hill staffers report that their bosses are swayed by constituent advocacy. Anecdotally, I've seen in person how differently a legislator reacts to a request from a constituent as compared to meetings with lobbyists, researchers, and public policy professionals. When someone from the community a lawmaker represents can tell them firsthand how an issue impacts their district, it can make a world of difference.

And that's primarily at the national level, where members of Congress can receive hundreds of thousands of constituent communications each year! Most book banning is currently taking place at the state, city, or local level. Your local legislators are receiving far fewer grassroots messages, and statistically, your voice can make an even bigger difference on these issues. Even if it feels hopeless, I can't emphasize enough how much your advocacy could impact censorship in your area. And if you want to really make a change, you can start a tiny grassroots movement simply by encouraging like-minded local friends and neighbors to join you in reaching out to their legislators as well.

### How to Learn About Book Bans in Your Area

The first step to taking action against book bans and censorship is finding out what legislation or school district directives are taking place. As there's not really a centralized place for people across the country to track state and local bills, this can be tricky. But paying attention to local news, staying engaged with your local library or school district, or a simple Google search can help you find out what's happening in your area.

If you aren't already aware of book bans in your town or state, try Googling [your state or city] + "book ban" and related keywords to see if any recent news comes up. See what reporting from this year you can find, and specifically, look for any bill numbers of current legislation, recently passed laws, or decisions by library or school boards. The important thing to identify here is what action is being taken and who the deciding party is.

Is there a bill currently being considered in your state legislature? If you can find a bill number, that is incredibly helpful for deciding who to contact and what to say. Bills that are listed as "HB ####" are usually in your state's House of Representatives, while bills with a number that starts with "SB" are generally in your state's Senate. Once you have that bill number, you can Google it (along with your state's name) to find more information on where it is in the legislative process, which will also help you determine who to address with your opinion on the bill. Read through a summary of the bill to find out what it would do. This will help you craft your message to your legislator.

It may be harder to find specific information about a decision at a school board or library board. But if that's where the action is happening, it's a lot simpler to figure out the legislative process impacting the bill. Simply contact whatever email or phone number that body has available for community input.

If you aren't able to find any information about book bans in your area, that doesn't mean you can't do anything! With coordinated attacks against freedom of speech happening across the country, it's quite possible that discussions are already occurring in your area, even if no bill has been introduced. You can still contact your local legislators to say you've seen what's been happening in communities like yours, and you stand against censorship and book bans in your libraries and schools. Ask them to stand with you if the issue arises in their work.

## Deciding Who to Contact

Now that you know where the book ban is occurring, it's time to figure out who to contact with your opinion. As mentioned above, if the censorship is taking place at a school board or library board, you can contact that body directly, usually through a phone number or email listed on their website. If they have regular meetings open to the public, as they should, you can attend one and raise your concern with book bans when they open the floor for questions or comments.

Similarly, if you're looking to fight back against a city council book ban, you can contact your city councilor directly. Most city councils have a way to look up your councilor with your address, and their contact information should be made available to constituents.

If you're specifically looking to fight book ban legislation in your state, you'll first need to do your research on where the legislation is in the process. For a bill that has been introduced (but not yet passed) in the House, contact your local representative. If it's introduced in the Senate, contact your state senator. Tell them to vote against the bill, and be sure to include the bill number. In many cases, a bill may have already passed one legislative body but not the other, so you'll want to contact the group actively considering the bill.

If the bill has already been passed by both the state House and Senate and is not yet signed into law by the governor, contact the governor's office and ask them not to sign the bill. If it's already been signed into law, you can contact your governor, state representative, and state senator and ask them to repeal the law. This can be an uphill battle, but it's still worth your time voicing your opinion on the matter. Even if it doesn't lead to a repeal, it can be an indicator to legislators of opposition to future bills that would further restrict access to books.

## Ways to Contact Your Legislators About Book Bans

There are many ways constituents can communicate with their legislators about issues that matter to them. All have some level of impact, although some may be more effective than others. Here are a few ways you can consider taking action against book bans.

- **Call your legislator:** This is a quick and easy way to contact your lawmaker, and their phone number for constituent concerns should be open and publicly available. When you call, you'll likely talk to a staffer who is accustomed to this kind of interaction. State



your name, be sure to say that you are a constituent, and briefly tell them your stance on the issue and how you hope the legislator will vote.

- **Write a letter/send an email:** Most legislators have some kind of contact box for digital communications. Take a moment to write out your thoughts on the matter and ask them to oppose book bans. A physical, mailed letter or postcard may have slightly more impact on your lawmaker, as it shows the problem is important enough for you to take the extra step to mail it. You'll likely receive a written response from the legislator, often thanking you for your input or explaining their stance on the issue.
- **Set up a meeting:** Lawmakers and their staff regularly take meetings with constituents to discuss issues important to their district. You can usually find a way to request a meeting on the legislator's website. This face-to-face interaction tends to make the biggest impact of all grassroots actions, but it can also be time-consuming and requires more preparation. But if you're someone who is directly impacted by book bans (like a teacher, librarian, or parent of a student whose school has banned books), then this can make a huge difference. Personal stories and connections with lawmakers are far more likely to leave an impression, and when the topic comes up again in their work, your interaction could be what guides their decision.
- **Attend a town hall:** Town halls are great opportunities to get face time with your legislators and raise important issues in a public forum. If you can get a group of friends and family from your community to back you up, even better.

## What to Say

So you've figured out the issue in your community and which decision makers to contact. Now, what do you say?

First off, it's important to emphasize that you're someone who lives in that community and therefore should have a say in issues affecting it. Establishing your personal connection to the issue is incredibly helpful. Are you a parent of a student in the district? Are you a teacher or librarian who provides access to books? Are you an avid reader who believes in the power books have to learn about the world around you? All of this and more can help you make a personal appeal that leaves a bigger impression with a lawmaker. And even if you don't have a direct connection to schools or libraries, your tax dollars pay for them, and you have a right to weigh in on how their censorship impacts your neighborhood.

Next, bring up the specific bill or issue at hand and what you hope the decision maker will do about it. You can say something like, "I know that Arkansas SB 1234 is currently being considered in the Senate, and as someone who supports freedom of speech and access to information, I hope that you'll vote against book bans and censorship in our state."

A great way to make sure your request sticks with the lawmakers is to tell a personal story or explain the negative impact it would have on your community. Talk about how books like the frequently challenged *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison helped you better understand the world around you and become a more thoughtful reader. Share how important it is to you that your

children are able to read about all kinds of people and experiences in the books they find at a library. Explain how proposed legislation creates a slippery slope for your community in terms of free speech and banning opinions a small group of neighbors disagree with.

Finally, reinforce your ask by sharing again what you hope the decision maker will do: vote against a bill, stand against any future legislation, repeal a current law, change school board rules that ban books, etc. Make sure that when your call, letter, or meeting ends, the target knows what you're asking them to do.

Avoid personally attacking anyone, cursing, telling a politician that you voted against them, or generally disparaging the decision maker. That's the quickest way to get your message ignored. No matter how much you disagree with someone, you can most effectively advocate for your position by being polite and professional, and by sticking to the issue you're there to discuss. You can be passionate and firm about your opposition to book bans without crossing any lines.

You can find a variety of helpful tools and tips for fighting book bans in our Anti-Censorship Tool Kit as well as at [Unite Against Book Bans](#), including suggested talking points and steps for grassroots organizing. It's most important that you explain your concerns in your own words and share your personal connection to the community it impacts, but here are a few ideas for what you might include:

- Freedom of speech is a constitutionally protected right, and book banning is a threat to our democracy.
- Books shouldn't be limited because a small number of people disagree with them. We must trust individuals and parents to make decisions about the books they and their children read.
- Children have the right to see themselves and their families reflected in the books they read.
- Books are a tool for learning more about the world and our history. Banning books is an attempt to limit our ability to learn about experiences outside of our own.
- According to the [American Library Association](#), 71% of Americans oppose efforts to ban books from libraries.
- Individuals should not be able to dictate what I or my children can and can't read. Let people make their own decisions about books.

### Other Ways to Make a Difference

Once you've contacted local lawmakers about your opposition to book bans, there are other ways you can expand your impact.

- **Recruit friends and family to join you:** You can start a local grassroots movement by getting your personal network of book lovers to advocate with you. Share what you learned about book bans in your area and who you contacted to speak out against it.

Give them the tools and encouragement to do the same, and ask them to help spread the word.

- **Write an op-ed for your local paper:** Spread awareness of harmful book bans and censorship in your community by writing an op-ed and submitting it to your newspaper. There are lots of tips online for writing effective advocacy op-eds, like [this guide from The Op-Ed Project](#). My advice is to keep it fairly brief, but explain how harmful the issue can be for you and your neighbors, as well as what readers can do to support access to books.
- **Join your local school or library board:** This may be a time consuming option, but it's an important way to stay abreast of conversations around book bans, censorship, and other important issues. You can have a say in future considerations and protect access to all kinds of books by running for your local school board or library board.
- **Join anti-censorship groups:** Sign up for our [Literary Activism newsletter](#) and the [Unite Against Book Bans](#) campaign to get breaking news about censorship and new ideas for how to help.

We hope this article has inspired you to speak out against book bans and fight for access to books in your community!

## What To Do When You See Pride Displays in Libraries

Danika Ellis

Censorship attempts are at a high we haven't seen in decades. Queer books and books by and about people of color are being targeted the most, with teachers and librarians being accused of "grooming" kids by stocking diverse books in their libraries or including them in curriculum. For anyone who lived through the '80s or '90s, it's an unsettling echo of how gay teachers were accused of pedophilia at that time. It's hard to overstate how much this is rolling back years of hard-won progress, and kids will be the ones suffering the most from the consequences.

It's been a hard few years for teachers and librarians already. Schools shut down, pivoted to remote learning, pivoted back to in-person, pivoted back to remote, and teachers had to adapt on the fly. They put their health on the line when going into schools packed with kids and equipped with inadequate PPE. They taught kids struggling with the social and emotional ramifications of a disrupted education as well as trying to catch up with projected learning outcomes.

Librarians, too, saw libraries close and then open and then often repeat. They adapted to their community's needs while trying to protect their health, often also with inadequate PPE. They faced patrons aggressively fighting against mask mandates and safety procedures.

This is stress on top of a system that's already broken. Teachers and librarians are both underpaid, and there was an issue with teacher retention even before the pandemic. Teachers already work far more hours than they're paid for, and the expectation of constantly pivoting back and forth from in-person to remote learning increased that exponentially on top of the other stresses, plus the exhaustion of teaching to a screen.

Then came the book banners. Suddenly, school board and library board meetings not only had people screaming about how masks violated their freedoms, but also had people accusing teachers and librarians of sexualizing children because they carried a picture book about a boy wearing a dress or a young adult book that mentions the existence of sex. The aggression and horrific accusations take a toll. Many board members felt unsafe even walking to their cars after meetings. Many quit — and were replaced with the people taking books off shelves.

In June, there will be teachers and librarians and teacher-librarians who put up Pride displays, even amidst all the vitriol spewed at them, and I can't adequately express my gratitude for them. Those displays will make queer people, and especially queer kids, feel less alone. They will feel more like they belong and that there's someone in their community who understands them and accepts them. Having just one supportive adult in their life makes LGBTQ youth [40% less likely to attempt suicide](#).

Those teachers and librarians will almost certainly get hate for that rainbow display, though. Many will have angry parents (or just random adults without kids in the district) show up at

school board or library board meetings. They may receive nasty emails, or have their display go viral on right-wing social media for "indoctrinating" children. They might even receive threats.

So next Pride month, I want you to promise to reach out to librarians or teachers when you see a Pride display and thank them. The hateful book banning side is outnumbered; they're just loud. We need to make our voices heard, too. We need teachers and librarians to know that they have support. Send an email. Reply to a tweet. Make a phone call. Even better: show up to those school board and library board meetings. Stand against the hatred and show that they don't speak for all of us.

If you're thinking that this doesn't happen where you're from (especially if you're anywhere in the U.S.), you're wrong. The book banners are organized, and they're spreading their talking points across the country. If they haven't made themselves known loudly in your community yet, even better: maybe you nip it in the bud and prevent them from even getting started by showing that your community stands with LGBTQ people, especially LGBTQ young people.

If you're reading this, you know that books matter. They shape our worldview. The books we read as kids help us imagine what's possible for ourselves. They tell us we belong and that we are loved. We've fought too long to throw that away for queer kids now.

So when you see a rainbow display, say something. Tell that librarian or teacher or bookseller that they're not alone in this. Take up that rainbow mantle and continue the fight.

## How To Find and Develop a Local Anti-Censorship Group

Kelly Jensen

How can you find like-minded people in your community to work with in ending censorship? It can certainly feel overwhelming and, in some instances, impossible, but now is the perfect time to find your allies and work together toward ensuring access to books and information for all.

The [Florida Freedom to Read Project](#), helmed by Jen Cousins and Stephana Ferrell, began as two like-minded parents coming together after the Orange County Public School system removed *Gender Queer*. From there, they've grown their activism work in pushing back against book censorship across the state. Their work has been instrumental in Florida and is a model for how concerned citizens can build similar networks to protect intellectual freedom and the right to access books and information for all. Here's how to do it (kudos to Cousins and Ferrell for sharing their tips with me).

### How To Find People Who Care About Book Censorship

- Connect with someone you know who cares deeply about access to books. This could be a best friend or someone you met by chance at a book club. Make a pact and hold one another accountable to one action that week, be it showing up to a board meeting or contacting the local library to let them know how much having queer books available means to you and your family.
- Find local parent groups on Facebook that align with your beliefs. You may find them labeled as "progressive" parent groups or you may find them via issues they champion. Much of the book banning movement emerged from anti-mask movements, so you may find like-minded people in pro-masking groups. Use these groups to see what topics are being discussed, and connect with those working on censorship issues. If no one is, that's where you begin to solicit those eager to do that work. You may create a special project or a separate group (Moms For Liberty puts captains in charge of their projects within their chapters).
- Twitter and Instagram can be extremely useful. Use Twitter to follow anti-censorship groups and individuals, and then engage so you can wrap your head around the issues. You'll be surprised how quick you connect with folks locally — and remember local might mean your town, your county, your region, or your state more broadly.
- Watch and read the previous recorded board meetings. You'll know the names of everyone who shows up to speak at these meetings, and from there, you might find allies you can connect with immediately. In an era where most people are on social media, looking someone up locally is not hard, and sending them a private message of support can get the ball rolling.
- Wear something that highlights your values. A shirt or tote or pin against censorship will attract attention in the carpool line at school, when you walk with your kids to school, or a school board/library board meeting. This is your chance to connect with fellow like-minded individuals who are eager to do something about book bans. A [FReadom](#)

[shirt](#) like this one, which supports the work of Texas Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Fund, can start a great conversation.

- Tap your networks. Maybe you are involved in a local animal shelter or drama group that feels removed from anti-censorship work. Wear your passion when you attend those things, and talk about them before/during/after meetings. This will get people curious.

## Building Your Anti-Censorship Work

Your group does not need to be big to be effective, and the more work you do, the more people will want to get involved. Here's how to *do* work:

- **Get niche.** You may be part of a big group, but getting specific in your issues will help you tackle them well. You are passionate about intellectual freedom, for example, but your group is focused on overturning book bans in schools and libraries. Ferrell likens it to being a business: you find your people and strengthen your work when you focus. You care about big issues, but your focus is on something more granular and measurable.
- **Be yourself.** Use your voice and speak up at meetings, in person, and online about the issues. You don't need to be an expert. You need to be passionate and willing to try. Activism is an action, and the more you model that, the more people find comfort in joining you (it's likely new to them — and you! — or something that creates anxiety since they've never done it before). Your words have value and power because you are a citizen in a democracy, but for parents, you have an especially vital voice in the decisions that affect your students. Identify yourself as that stakeholder.
- **Speak at school and library board meetings.** You will be seen by others as someone who is doing the work and who they can connect with to build their bravery muscles to do the same thing. Remember: even if you're too nervous to talk at a board meeting, you can write a letter to them and send a copy to your local newspaper. This will get your name out there with stakeholders and people in your area.
- **Research local teacher and librarian groups and get to know them.** For Cousins, this meant getting to know FAME, [Florida Association for Media in Education](#), a professional organization for school media specialists. She was able to connect with educators and learn what issues and challenges they were dealing with. You likely have a state or more local group similar to FAME.
- **Talk with your local school library workers** and get to know what their needs are. Introduce yourself as a citizen who is eager to support them and advocate on their behalf. You can build a parent network through championing their needs.
- **Get to know your local school board** and, if you have a specific individual representing your district, learn as much as you can about them. The more you get to know them, the more involved you're able to get, and the more articulately you can speak on behalf of their needs and the needs of the broader community.
- **Ask to talk with your board members one-on-one if talking in front of the whole board at a meeting is intimidating.** They can do this, and it is an opportunity for you to voice concerns and/or ask what you can do to support their efforts against censorship. (On a personal note, I've sent more than one "heads up" email to a board member or

administration member when I saw things happening in a community that they may not have — the gratitude is real, since they can't have their eyes or ears on everything).

- When you speak, whether at a board meeting, individually with librarians or educators, or within your anti-censorship groups, emphasize that you **support teachers and librarians and are their allies**. Reiterate that you know their work is tough and that their passion and the pressures they face are real. Ferrell calls this knowing when to lay or pull the punch on their behalf.
- **Befriend the teachers' union**. Teachers' union members are often parents themselves. Support public education? You support their unions, too. As soon as educators know you have their backs, they will spread the word about your work and mission, which continues to grow your network.
- **Bring two friends with you to the next board meeting**. At the following meeting, ask them to each bring two friends. Now there are seven of you.

### Now What?

Resist the temptation to believe that once you've created a group or have shown up to a board meeting once or written a letter that you're done. Activism is ongoing work, and in an era of dismantling public education and libraries through actions such as book banning, it's going to be a long, hard, ever-curving road. What began as complaints about a few books has blossomed out to now be a blatant attack on LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities, and it is a coordinated effort to defund and destroy public education and services.

This moment requires a lot more than a post or two. It requires doing that, plus getting five friends to do it, and then getting five more of their friends to do it. It's something to put on the calendar and make time for regularly, even if it's a monthly reminder to send that letter to the board or show up to a board meeting and support those talking in favor of book access for all (wear a shirt or tote with your beliefs on it, whether you speak or not!).

There is a difference between advocacy and activism. Both are important and both do vital work. Advocacy builds awareness; activism builds a movement.

Track your work and your wins. Share on social media that you spoke up in defense of a book at a meeting or that you had coffee with your school board representative to talk about the biggest needs in your district. Contact other groups who are doing anti-censorship work to share those successes and how you did it. That information spreads and opens up hope and space for others to get started or keep pressing ahead.





## How to Develop a Local Anti-Censorship Group

Find like-minded people via Facebook and Twitter. Be specific in your mission to end book bans.

Connect with other parents at school drop offs and events through anti-censorship apparel.

Coordinate group attendance at school/library board meetings to support those who speak

Introduce yourself as a champion of public education to your board representatives, library workers, local teacher/library unions + other organizations for professionals

Be yourself--use your voice as a citizen and let people know what you stand for. Continue to try, learn, and try again.

Bring a friend to the next board meeting and have them bring one, too. Wear the same color or anti-censorship messaging.

**For more ideas:**

**[bookriot.com/anti-censorship-groups](http://bookriot.com/anti-censorship-groups)**

# How To Use FOIA To Uncover Book Challenges

Kelly Jensen

One of your fundamental rights as a U.S. citizen is access to public information. The Freedom of Information Act ([FOIA](#)) requires government agencies to release information to citizens upon request, with the goal of making government more transparent to its citizens. It's undergone a number of changes since its inception in 1966, but it is a tool you have a right to utilize — and a tool you should utilize, especially when your rights are being stripped away. Here's how to use FOIA, why you should use FOIA, and how to use FOIA to uncover book challenges that may be happening in your own backyard.

First, an important note for anyone who works in public service, be it public libraries, public school libraries, public higher education institutions, government information services, or similar: if you aren't already aware, you should know that any emails you send to and from your work email are subject to FOIA requests. This is why it's imperative to keep a personal email and to do any personal emailing off work-related servers. You've likely seen that disclosure in email signatures, and it's there for a reason. If you find yourself in a position where you need to reach out to the media or organization related to something going on in the workplace, do it through a private email; this applies, too, to any communication you do via work-provided cell phones or other technology.

This is not comprehensive. Instead, this is a basic, how-to guide. Know what is and is not permitted under your own state and municipality.

## How To Submit a FOIA Request

Most government organizations include a way to submit FOIA requests on their website. In a typical community, for example, the town's website may have a link to where those requests can go. The county and state may have similar websites, as does the public school. You need to know the following to begin:

- Is the organization a government organization?
- What jurisdiction within the government does it fall (e.g. city, county, government)?

Once you've identified both, then you can head to the appropriate website. Through this guide, we'll use the example of [Wake County Public Library](#). This particular library system is a government organization and it's [part of the county's jurisdiction](#).

You have two options from here for finding the FOIA form. You can head to the government's website and search — for Wake County, search shows nothing — or you can flip through the on-site options to see where that form might live. This is time consuming for this example, but your community may make the form much easier to find.

The second option is to search the jurisdiction name in Google alongside FOIA. [That's where it pops up for Wake County.](#)

Every community's form is going to look different, and every one will give you an estimated time frame. Some will charge you for this information, though it's not a charge for the information itself. It's a charge for the time it takes to collect the information.

Note that schools may keep this information on their school board websites. Here's [what it looks like for the Wake County Public School System.](#)

## What Can I Ask For in a FOIA Request?

Before you begin to submit any request, see if the information you want is already publicly available. School boards, library boards, and most city, county, and state governmental councils keep their agendas and minutes on their website or they utilize a third-party website to host those documents (BoardDocs is a common one). You can find a lot of information this way, but note there might be a lag between when a meeting happens and when the minutes from that meeting are finalized and available.

The [Wake County Public Library board](#) does not make their minutes or agendas public on the government website. It's also not searchable on the county website. If you wanted to get these records, you might use a FOIA.

Let's take a [look at a library board](#) that does make these minutes available, though: [Irving Public Library](#). The minutes are organized by year, and [if you click on a year](#), you'll see all of the minutes, the agenda, and — where you'll find a lot of really great information — the agenda/board packet (the language may be either one). Many organizations also post recordings of their meetings or live stream them.

One of the reasons that writing letters to the library staff, administration, and board is emphasized as a powerful act in breaking censorship attempts is that these items are collected into these board packets and distributed to every board member at the meeting. They read them and can act upon them. In the January 2022 board packet for the Irving Public Library Board, you'll see a lot of information, including another visit from one of the women who has waged a [years-long campaign against collection materials in the library](#). This information will likely not make the news, but it's information a citizen concerned with intellectual freedom should know — they will want to see what was said and make sure they write the board or show up to the next board meeting and express agreement with the library's collection development policy as-is. **This did not require a FOIA to acquire.**

Irving offers an example of what is done well in putting information out there. Wake County's lack of information, on the other hand, is where utilizing FOIA is going to be handy.

So what can you request in a FOIA? There may be some items that are not subject to requests, depending on your state or county, but for the most part, you can ask for the following:

- Board meeting minutes, agendas, and associated material relating to governmental business
- Any emails to, from, between, and among those with government-issued email addresses
- Text messages between and among those in a public meeting using official technology owned by the government (for example: texts between two school board members during a meeting)

This is a limited scope, of course, but the primary places where you may find book challenges or information about censorship in your community. FOIA allows for redaction of information, meaning that if you request certain items that feature information that isn't public — the address of a private citizen, for example — it'll be blacked out when items are sent back to you.

### The Best Way To Get Information Quickly

Having the power to ask for whatever you want is incredible, but the secret to a good FOIA request that's filled quickly and efficiently is getting specific in your request. Know what you want to find out, alongside keywords and key people. Your initial request may not turn up everything you hope to find, but it will help you find the chains of communication and where your hunt may need to go next.

In searching for information about the book *Gender Queer* being removed from Wake County Public Libraries, I made my targeted search very specific. I found the names and email addresses of the library's top administrators, as well as those of the board members.

Set a target date range and choose some keywords to really make the work of the FOIA officer — the person who'll be doing the searching — as easy as possible. Here's what the one I did for Wake County Public libraries looked like:

I'm requesting all of the minutes from Wake County Library Commission meetings between October 1, 2021 and December 15, 2021. I'm also requesting all emails between members of that commission and the director Michael J. Wasilick, deputy director Ann M. Burlingame, and Spokesperson Alice Avery which include the following words: LGBTQ, Queer, remove, weed, pull, censor, "Gender Queer" and "Maia Kobabe." This request concludes with emails between Wasilick and Burlingame with those same words.

Days after submitting the request, I received the board minutes and a series of emails between and among the named parties about the book. [I shared those emails](#) in the article, connecting the dots between the emails and who made the decisions to pull the book.

There were a number of additional details within the emails that could have led to further FOIA requests, but thanks to the work of journalists and lawyers on this particular story, I decided not to pursue them.

That book is [back on library shelves](#).

## How To Use FOIA to Learn About Book Challenges in Your Community

In the toolkit for fighting book bans and challenges, I talked in-depth about the death of local journalism. As more and more small newspapers shut down, there are fewer reporters on the ground covering these beats. That means information doesn't get distributed to the community like it once did. Instead, right-wing funded [fake local news sites](#) have popped up, creating a dangerous spread of misinformation.

Because the news isn't able to cover every community, only the most salacious stories are reported. This isn't denigrating that and the importance of that coverage. Instead, it's meant to highlight the gaping holes in coverage and the information that's not out there.

As a citizen, you have a right to know what's going on in your community. FOIA is a tool you can — and should — feel empowered to use.

Book challenges [showcase repeat titles](#), often coordinated from [groups aiming to take down public educational institutions](#). If you want to keep ahead of possible challenges in your own home town, read and know what's going on in meetings at the public institutions. If you see something that feels off, trust your gut. This is where you can file a FOIA request and seek information for confirmation. If you discover a challenge in progress or read a complaint about a book, you can take action by showing up to those board meetings in support of the material or the people working to keep that material in these public institutions.

Another reason to use these tools? To keep an eye on the governance of your public institutions. This last year has showcased just how those with anti-intellectual agendas are running for and [getting seats on school and library boards](#) in low-turnout local elections — and those voices are the ones being loudest and [making the most disturbing choices in the room](#). Know who is running, what they're doing, and step up and be part if you're able to.

Exercise your rights as a citizen. In today's modern world, one of the best tools for being informed, local news, has been defunded, and what's replacing it offers an agenda, not facts. It's fallen on individuals to do the work of oversight. Let this be an opportunity to be not just informed, but empowered and engaged in local issues that matter to you.

### Further Reading

Again, the above is a starting point. Here are some additional resources both for keeping track of censorship and for utilizing your FOIA rights:

- [MuckRock's FOIA 101](#) is a giant guide to all things Freedom of Information Act. This will be far more comprehensive than you may ever need, but know this resource exists.
- PEN America's [report on educational gag orders](#) will offer insight into the sorts of legislation aimed at harming public educational institutions. This ties into censorship and finding out who is behind these movements.

- EveryLibrary hosts the [massive spreadsheet of book challenges and bans](#) across the U.S., maintained and updated by Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson.
- Red Wine and Blue's [Book Ban Busters map of book challenges](#) and their current status.

## How to Start a Banned Book Club

Nikki DeMarco

School libraries have been [under attack](#) recently. This fight isn't anything new. The [first banned book](#) in North America dates back to 1637 with the Puritans (not surprising anyone). When it comes to banning books in schools though, the Supreme Court set the standard with a [ruling in 1982](#) in [Island Trees School District v. Pico](#). It remains highly politicized today. In Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial election, Glenn Youngkin [wanted to ban](#) Nobel-Prize winner Toni Morrison's *Beloved* after a mother claimed it gave her child nightmares.

Librarians all over the United States have been [fighting back](#). They are working to change laws and starting [online movements](#) to get representatives' attention. Students are curious about why these books are being banned, so in response are starting their own [banned book clubs](#). If you're interested in starting an anti-censorship book club in your community, here are some tips for how to start a banned book club.

I've written before about [how to start a teen book club](#), and many of the strategies are the same. A crucial difference is that banned book clubs that meet in schools need to be completely student led and facilitated. In today's political climate, many educational professionals are afraid of being prosecuted or losing their jobs if they deviate from the state mandated curriculum. As just one example, the aforementioned Governor Youngkin [set up a tip line](#) for people in Virginia to report educators who were teaching critical race theory.

Also, it needs to be student led because they are the people who are being censored. Starting a banned book club is an opportunity for teens to discuss and think critically about why particular books are being targeted and banned.

### Step 1: Decide Which Books To Read

Okay, let's say you have your students and student leaders ready to read some banned books. Now what? The next step for how to start a banned book club is for the students to make a list of banned books they want to read. If you live in a district where a list of books have been banned, the selection process is easier. Students will choose from that list and vote (this is easiest through a Google Form) on which book they want to start with first. The students [banned book club at Vandegrift High School](#) in Texas can be an example here.

If, on the other hand, your particular district is fortunate enough to have all the books the librarians ordered on the shelves, this can be done several ways. You could use the [American Library Association's 10 most challenged books of all time](#) list. There's also the [most challenged YA titles](#), and the ALA also provides lists of the most challenged books by decade: [1990–1999](#), [2000–2009](#), [2010–2019](#). Or, if your club wants to read in solidarity for clubs in districts with banned books, they could choose a place and read books from their banned list. Here is a list of [50 books some Texas parents want banned from school libraries](#).



## Step 2: Get the Books

You have some interested teens, and they have chosen a book to read. The next issue is to find a way to get the books into the students' hands. Some books are banned from classroom use as an instructional text, but not banned from the school library. In this case, students can borrow the book from their library or other school libraries in their district through inter library loans. Other times, the book can't be found on any shelves in that school district. Students can then head to their local public libraries and bookstores.

They can also go online and petition for books. Many people are looking for ways to help these book clubs and are willing to buy books on their behalf. VHS Banned Book Club has a [linktree](#) on their [Instagram page](#) with information about what they have already read and what titles they are looking for next. Students could put something personal on their own social media or start a book club specific account. Some authors are being generous and providing book clubs with copies of their books that have been challenged or banned. Ashley Hope Perez did this with her book *Out of Darkness*.

## Step 3: Discuss the Books

Now it's time for the discussions. Breaking up discussions into bimonthly meetings makes it manageable for students to read the book over a month. It also allows more discussion time with multiple meetings. Again, defer to your students here, as they will know what works best for them.

Next, be sure to include in the discussion time to talk about why this book was banned. This is especially important during the first reading, so students can keep these reasons in mind as they finish the book over the following two weeks. In the final meeting about the book, students should discuss their general thoughts on the book, and also whether or not they think the book should be banned. If they decide this book shouldn't be banned, they can take action if they want by writing to representatives, school board members, or curriculum specialists.

## Alternative Steps for Adults

If you are not a student and are interested in starting a banned book club in your community, step one is different. Pick a leader, then follow steps two and three. A book club made up of adults and teens that does not meet during school hours is much less complicated than the completely student run book club. It also might be easier for these members to buy the book of the month, and instead of asking online for books, this club could go online and find other book clubs to donate to.

Teen readers need to see themselves in the books they read. [Representation matters](#). Books are a safe place for teens to explore controversial topics. They are a place to read about how to deal with abuse, mental illness, racism, homophobia, sexual assault, and more in hypothetical situations — a thought experiment that might save a student's life if it comes to their hands at

the right time. So if you've been playing around with the idea of starting a banned book club, take this as your sign to get started. Books save lives. Let's get as many into the hands of teens as we can.

# How To Create A Good Banned Books Display

Kelly Jensen

Banned Books Week is coming, which means that waves of displays in libraries, classrooms, and bookstores are also incoming. We're already seeing many, and while they are useful for highlighting the reality of censorship across America to those who are not as tapped into the news about it, too many banned books week displays are outdated and do not accurately reflect the reality of censorship right now. Banned Books Week displays continue to rely on older classics that have been historically challenged or removed. But to make a true impact — and to be accurate and effective in messaging — it's time to rethink the Banned Books Week displays and make them more up-to-date and include a call to action.

## What Makes a Good Banned Books Week Display?

The five ideas below are easy to implement no matter what kind of space you're working with in your organization. These would work on a traditional display, on an end cap, or even on a wall or the side of a book stack.

### **1. Have accurate and current banned books on display**

This means your selection of books will mirror the books you have up in February for Black History Month and the books displayed in June for Pride month. The current wave of book bans is targeting books by and about LGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals. Include as many banned and challenged comics as possible, too. While it's true *Charlotte's Web* has been banned before, it is not being banned now. Choose instead to put *Flamer* or *Gender Queer* or *This Book is Anti-Racist* on display instead.

### **2. Get creative in highlighting popular books**

One of the challenges right now in libraries especially is that it can be hard to put challenged and banned books on display because they're circulating. That is a great problem to have and one that isn't hard to solve. Make copies of book covers or print them out, put them in an acrylic frame, then include a QR code and/or instructions for how people can put a holds request in for the book. The display itself can be just this and include information about why the books are not currently on shelves, and note that, despite the bump in popularity many receive in the midst of censorship waves, these books do not suddenly become best sellers or remain as in-demand when bans cool down.

Another option, and one that would make a huge impact, is to have a display that is empty. Put out the book holders and purposefully leave them empty on your Banned Books display. Maybe you have fliers or handouts on it, or maybe you leave it without anything, sending the message that that is what the reality is when books are removed. It'd certainly be accurate and catch people's attention.

If you're in a state with new book ban laws that limit what you can do or so, the empty display idea could be especially powerful.

### **3. Include action and advocacy materials**

Let patrons and visitors know there are incredible resources out there talking about First Amendment rights and intellectual freedom. Include a handout and/or link on your website/social media to sources such as: [Get Ready Stay Ready](#), PEN America's report on [the state of book bans in America](#) (and additional resources on free expression), [EveryLibrary](#), to Penguin Random House's [Book Ban Resource Hub](#), and to our own [Literary Activism newsletter](#).

If you have a local group doing anti-censorship work, highlight them. If you don't, share resources on [how to begin an anti-censorship group](#).

Include information about local elections and why they matter (and if you're in a school or library, you can tie that neatly into how your institution is taxpayer funded and taxpayers have the right to elect individuals who work on behalf of a whole community, not just those with close ties to them). You can also include information about [local school boards](#) and [why they're vital](#), as well as information about how people can get involved in their library board.

### **4. Focus on celebrating intellectual freedom and the First Amendment, not banned books**

It may seem like a nit picky thing, but no one is celebrating banned books except those banning books. Instead, make sure the language around your banned books display and information is celebrating the right to read or intellectual freedom. Celebrate First Amendment rights, not banned books.

Highlight and note that the books are banned or being banned. But celebrate the right to read. The language and angle we use matters.

### **5. Create a call to action**

There are many ways to create a call to action with your display, so know that what might work best for your community could differ from these ideas. But some suggestions include:

- using a QR code to check one's voter registration and/or linking to information about the upcoming election;
- including information about how to request a book for the library (in a recent event I did for teens as part of Brooklyn Public Library's Intellectual Teen Freedom Council, they were surprised to learn they could request a library purchase a book and that that makes a big difference);
- linking to upcoming school and library board meeting dates and topics and how to show up and speak or write to those boards;

- including sticky notes and writing instruments and asking people to write a short review of any banned books they've read and loved OR writing a short note on why having access to books matters;
- having information about local, state, and federal legislators and how to write to them/their offices about First Amendment rights and the freedom to read;
- and/or having some kind of material that people can take with them that includes steps for advocating for intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights, be it a flier or bookmark

Your call to action could also be as simple as clarifying that books on the display are for use and that users are *encouraged* to check them out, read them, and return them. This part of the display is about getting users to do something, and borrowing is itself a powerful and vital act.

Additional notes:

- Be prepared to potentially have a book challenged. In the current book banning climate, it's possible your display — like the Pride displays earlier this year — will become a target to the small number of censors who think they speak on behalf of an entire community.
- Include information about how people can challenge a book in your library, if applicable. Remember to have your [book challenge policies updated](#) and ready to go. The more accessible the information, the more transparent you are, and the more censors cannot argue that you hinder their rights to demand books not be accessible to an entire community.
- If there is currently a book ban happening locally, highlight that. Whether it is your institution or not, giving these displays a local angle is extremely important. Believing this is [a red state or blue state thing](#) is dangerous and disingenuous; people deserve to know that it is happening in their backyard because it IS happening in their backyard.
- Dealing with a challenge or attempted book ban? Put that out there and include updates on the process. Example: if *All Boys Aren't Blue* is being challenged in your local school district, look through the school board agendas to note where in the process it is.
- Many displays enjoy including the reasons why a book is banned. This might be tricky today, in part because the reasons are "parental rights." But maybe that in and of itself is good enough to put as a reason, as it begins a conversation about what that even means and why it is some parents believe they have the right to speak on behalf of an entire community. Not to mention, why aren't student rights considered?

The more transparent you are and the more focus you put on the current, accurate realities of book bans right now, the more you're helping put truth out there for those who may not be aware of what's going on and/or who may be persuaded by groups that have pretty signage, t-shirts, and messages about their joyful war (and to be clear, they're not ignorant for this — the reason such groups are so successful is they're able to be persuasive!).

Banned Books Week should be an opportunity toward crushing censorship as it is right now.

# How To Make a Good Banned Books Display

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Have accurate and current banned books on display

1

Get creative in highlighting popular books which may be checked out

2

Include action and advocacy materials

3

Focus on celebrating Intellectual Freedom and the First Amendment

4

Create a call to action

5

For more details:  
[bookriot.com/banned-books-displays](http://bookriot.com/banned-books-displays)

## Please Stop "Celebrating" Banned Books Week

Kelly Jensen

Grab a copy of *Speak* or *Gender Queer* or any of Toni Morrison's books. With the kickoff of Banned Books Week, it's high time to talk about these books and what it is that makes them scary and worth banning.

This is pretty well-tread territory. The content inside of books scares people, and as a reaction and a way to control what it is others have access to — and in most cases, it's their children and their children's peers — they seek out ways to censor or ban them.

In every comment section or discussion about book censorship, there's a variation on the *Can't they just get it somewhere else?* question. In every comment section or discussion about book censorship, there's a variation from authors or friends of authors who *want* to see their books censored, since [they assume it's a guaranteed way to make some sales](#).

And in the weeks, days, and hours leading up to Banned Books Week, there's the reminder that it's time to "celebrate."

We "celebrate" Banned Books Week.

While it may seem like it's a small quibble, it's not. The way we use and apply language is important, and when it comes to talking about the issue of censorship, the way we focus our attention matters significantly. Celebrating banned books week is a marketing opportunity in many corners of the book world, and not without reason. These books are important. They deserve to be talked about. Talking about these books matters because it's how we talk about reading, about the sharing of ideas, and about why books and words are tools for growth.

But there's a fine line between celebrating banned books week and marketing books because they've been censored. This isn't a week about profits or how to sell these banned books.

Judith Krug pioneered Banned Books Week in 1982, with the goal to "to teach the importance of our First Amendment rights and the power of literature, and to draw attention to the danger that exists when restraints are imposed on the availability of information in a free society."

Being sponsored by book-advocating organizations, including the American Library Association, the American Booksellers Association, and others, it's natural that banned books would be front and center. Creating displays, offering events, and opening up discourse about these books and why people fear and seek to ban them is important in advocating for them — and it's important for advocating the most crucial component of Krug's vision: drawing attention to the danger that exists when restraints are imposed on access and availability of information.

When we “celebrate” banned books week, we strip the context of censorship from the equation. Books are the conduit for discussion, but they aren’t the purpose. Their being banned isn’t the celebration.

The celebration is intellectual freedom.

When a book is pulled from shelves, it’s *not* easy for readers to seek the book out. The notion that anyone can hop onto an online retailer and purchase a copy is fraught with privilege and it undermines the implications of what it means when a book is taken away from readers. A book being censored or removed from the hands of readers isn’t about the physical or digital manifestation of the book; it’s about the fact a right has been stripped from another individual or a community more broadly.

Authors or readers who rally behind the idea of wanting a book challenged or censored for the purposes of sales fail to understand the implications for readers, too. It’s not about your book or your friend’s book or that book you really, really love. It’s not about the object at all. It’s about the way the freedom to engage with ideas is taken from people who have the Constitutional right to interact with those concepts as they wish. Whenever an author admits to selfishly wanting his or her book challenged or censored, it’s impossible not to see how much they miss the point. That’s a disservice to all readers.

“Celebrating” banned books fuels the idea that it’s books we need to be protecting. It also fuels the idea that becoming part of an elite club of banned books is a badge of honor — a merit earned because of something done on author’s part or a means of marketing that book.

Banned books week is about none of these ideas.

The ability to read any book you wish to off any shelf is about the freedom of thought. It’s about the freedom not to have to jump through hoops to pick up the book everyone is talking about. It’s about being able to **decide for yourself** whether or not you agree with the central premise of the book or the ideas expressed by the author of that book. It’s about your right to read and think, free from other people making those decisions on your behalf.

Pull one of your favorite banned books off the shelf, make a display, do a reading — and enjoy the fact no one is stopping you from doing so. Read those words out loud, make a video about them, write passionately about those books and what they mean.

But don’t do it under the guise of “celebrating” the banned books.

Celebrate the intellectual freedom to do so.



*\*Note: This article was written in 2014. While the titles of more current book bans have been updated, the remaining piece still resonates.*

## For the Librarians: How to Update Your Book Challenge Forms (with Template)

Kelly Jensen

A crucial tool for library workers is a strong, updated collection development policy. If it's been several years since visiting whatever is in place, it is more than worth it to pull it out and update it as your library continues to grow and evolve. It's vital to keep this updated all the time, but especially during a censorship-friendly era, as a collection development policy lays the groundwork for the materials being selected and de-selected and offers patrons a guide to what they can expect. But in addition to a strong and current collection development policy, something each and every library needs is an up-to-date, solid challenge policy (also known as a reconsideration policy)/book challenge form.

For decades, the American Library Association (ALA) has provided a reconsideration form template. It offers all of the basics, and gives those who wish to exercise their rights to contest material to do so. This is a good thing, not a bad thing. A healthy democracy encourages input from an array of individuals.

But in an era of increased censorship with no anticipated cooling in sight, it's time that challenge forms and policies are overhauled across the country.

The purpose of a challenge policy is to protect the professionals within an institution and to protect the rights of those whose tax money funds those institutions. Challenge policies uphold the First Amendment rights of all individuals while providing a formal avenue to address concerns in a uniform manner. This uniformity and consistency is important, as the leading reason for book bans in school libraries right now is a district either choosing not to follow or ignoring their policies for challenges all together. [PEN America reports](#) that only 11 school districts have followed their own policies consistently and that doing so reduced the number of books banned in those institutions.

One of the weaknesses in ALA's template policy and discussion of book challenge policies more broadly is that it allows informal complaints. Informal complaints could be anything from showing up to a board meeting to [read offending passages](#) out loud to a parent telling a librarian they are disgusted by a particular title being available. These informal complaints are to be treated the same as a formal complaint. That leaves the door wide open to interpretation from individuals, as well as for administrative overreach, as has been seen [again](#) and [again](#).

All book challenges should require a formal complaint. These complaint forms should be easy to find and readily available to those who'd like to use them. A good collection development policy portends a good challenge policy, and making both easily accessible shows confidence in not only those frameworks but also in upholding First Amendment rights.

In a recent presentation, New Jersey librarian Martha Hickson highlighted the [weaknesses in ALA's template reconsideration](#) policy. She points out specifically that the template policy is nearly identical across some of the most high-profile book challenges in the U.S. And, for the most part, these forms don't expect much from those who file them. As we've seen over and over, because so many of these challenges are coming from social media pushes or through book lists distributed to right-wing groups and organizations, all that's needed to do to file a form is print the images that have been shared, point to "obscenity" laws (or something similar), and demand the book be removed. Without updating their template form, ALA has not kept up with the current realities in school and public libraries.

What should be included in a good challenge policy?

- Articulate the purpose of a library collection and tie it into topics of liberty, justice, and freedom (i.e., the First Amendment).
- Outline the exact steps of the formal process on the form, including timeline, committee makeup, contact points, and what information is used in making a decision. Make this form readily accessible and easy to locate on library websites. The more information available, the more transparent the process.
- Be explicit in form challenge requirements: materials were read in full, were understood, and points of contention are not copied or pasted from anywhere outside the filer's own work. Limit how many challenges a patron can have active at once and that once a decision is made, it remains in place for a predetermined period of time.
- Include the costs of a book challenge in your form. [Estimates are fine](#) and should include costs for acquiring materials for each committee member, time spent reading the material, costs for accessing reviews of the material, and time spent in committee meetings.

Once you can articulate those things, then it's on to developing a formal challenge form. The form should include two parts — the first of which primarily follows ALA's template, while the second offers a deeper level of insight into what constitutes a problem with the material.

Here's what that might look like:

**Introduction:** Begin with a short explanation of what the procedure is for challenging a book, the estimated [cost of a challenge](#), and the timeline from form submission to decision. Be clear that only one form from a household is accepted at a time, and that material being challenged must be read in full. The form must also be completed in full.

Include a line about the purpose of the library collection and its commitment to the rights of individuals to read and access materials they would like to is a fundamental principle of the institution.

**Part 1:** The basic information. [This looks like ALA's reconsideration request form](#) with some adjustments.

- Requester’s name, contact information, and if they are affiliated with any group
- Type of material being addressed
- Title, author, year of publication
- How did you learn about this material?
- Did you read/listen/view the material in full?

For “no” responses on the final question, no further action is needed. The resolution is simply that the material in question was not considered in full and therefore cannot be put through the reconsideration process.

**Part 2:** Understanding the material being challenged. Much of this is adapted from librarian [Martha Hickson’s suggestions](#). Note here that incomplete responses or no responses to questions will void the form.

- Explain the purpose of this material
- What positive qualities does the material present?
- What are your concerns about the material, including citations and quotes?
- How has the material been assessed in professional review sources (include citations)?
- Provide citations in support of your objections
- How does the material fail to comply with district educational objectives?
- In what ways does the material fail to meet state educational objectives?
- Explain how the material fails to meet Intellectual Freedom standards
- Who would be negatively impacted by this material and how (citations and evidence required)?
- What would you replace the material with (include titles and professional reviews of replacement)?
- Why do you believe you should be able to restrict the reading choices of community members, including children?

All forms should require a signature at the bottom, indicating that the person who has filed the form understands the purpose of the library and that parents always have the right to educate their own children about the books that may be best for them.

[This book challenge form template is available to save, download, and modify.](#)

## Appendix: Additional Resources

### [\*Adventures in Censorship by Richard Price\*](#)

Price is a professor with a focus on LGBTQ+ politics, particularly when it comes to censorship of books in schools and libraries. Their website offers deep dives into censorship stories, all built upon in-depth research with an academic basis.

### [\*Book Censorship Database by Tasslyn Magnusson\*](#)

Dr. Magnusson has diligently tracked book censorship happening across the country since October 2021. This database is one of the most authoritative and up-to-date resources to finding out what is happening, what books are being targeted, and the statuses of those challenges.

### [\*EveryLibrary\*](#)

The first and only political action group for libraries in the US, EveryLibrary provides advocacy and support for book challenges to those experiencing them. In addition, EveryLibrary highlights issues pertinent to public libraries and public school libraries nationwide, including tools to contact local politicians.

### [\*Frank Strong on Medium\*](#)

Franklin Strong holds a PhD in comparative literature and has been writing in-depth about censorship, particularly in Texas. His work breaks down the complex connections between terminology used by right-wing groups and how the assault on the freedom to read is about far more than the books being targeted.

### [\*PEN America\*](#)

PEN America is the leading group focused on Free Expression in America — and across the world. PEN has developed some powerhouse reports on the state of book bans and on educational gag orders that illuminate these growing, troubling trends.

### [\*Rage Inside The Machine by John Norcross\*](#)

This presentation takes a deep dive into local politics and how the movement from “open the schools” during the pandemic led to anti-masking movements, which led to book banning, all under the guise of “parental rights.” Chock-full of great graphics and images, this guide clarifies and ties together the disparate pieces of contemporary censorship.

### [\*Red Wine and Blue\*](#)

The team behind Red Wine and Blue are focused on courting suburban parents who may otherwise never found themselves engaged in local politics to get active. They provide a wealth of free trainings on topics such as showing up and speaking at board meetings, submitting Freedom of Information Act Requests, making politics a social event, and more.

### [The School Board Project](#)

An ongoing project, this database provides information about upcoming school board elections by state. Included are each public school district, links to their board information, and details about how many seats will be available in the upcoming election. Use this to track candidates, to determine who to contact at your local school, and to determine whether or not you would like to be on your local board.

### [Unite Against Book Bans](#)

Created by the American Library Association, Unite Against Book Bans provides tools and information that allow anyone to advocate for anti-censorship. Among the tools on the site are those for being ready to vote, pledges for library and school board candidates, and a toolkit for ensuring access to books for all.

## Appendix: Additional Book Riot Resources and Reading on Censorship

- [How to Prepare for Book Challenges](#)
- [Book Sales, Promotion, and Donations Don't Solve Censorship](#)
- [How to Address Misinformation and Book Challenges](#)
- [How "Objective" Book Rating Systems Fuel Censorship](#)
- [Queer Books are a Hydra: An Anti-Censorship Manifesto](#)
- [Quiz: Can You Match the Book Banning Quote to the Decade?](#)
- [Why and How Censorship Thrives in American Prisons](#)

## Appendix: Graphics

Here is a [folder of the graphics included in this book!](#) Feel free to download them, share them on social media, or print and display them.