



EXPLAINER

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FREEDOM TO LEARN SERIES: WEAPONIZING BOOKS TO HALT STUDENTS' FREEDOM TO READ

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Introduction

Students are losing access to books as the wave of book censorship in the United States grows rapidly. When [PEN America](#) released its first report in 2021 tracking book bans in the U.S., findings showed that **more than 4 million students had their freedom to read curtailed across 5,049 schools, 138 school districts, in 32 states.** Since this report, findings from the 2022-23 school year recorded [3,362 book bans in U.S. public school classrooms and libraries](#), an increase of 33% in the last school year.

According to the data, a majority of books subject to censorship explore issues examining race, LGBTQ+ rights, and U.S history—topics that can facilitate critical thinking and discussion that help shape a young person's worldview. The deliberate exclusion of diverse literature in classrooms can be viewed as a part of larger efforts to create singular sanitized stories of identities and cultural experiences, and erase the humanity of students whose identities and lived experiences exist outside of white heteronormative ideologies. Given that reading [helps students experience other people's lives from their perspectives](#), students must have access to diverse points of view and information to make informed decisions about themselves and others.

This is a three-part "freedom to learn" series exploring school censorship, book bans, and attacks on students' right to read, which is ultimately an attack on civil liberties and democracy itself. In future reports, censorship in public libraries and classroom curricula will be discussed further.

The History of Book Censorship

Over the last two years, countless research and articles demonstrate a coordinated and systematic wave of book banning in our public school classrooms and public

libraries. However, some of the earliest instances of censorship on literature [date back to the 17th Century](#), where common targets of censorship were authors who challenged the ideals and principles of Puritanism. Throughout U.S. history, many book challenges have arisen from protests against materials viewed as “obscene” or “offensive” to certain religious beliefs. For instance, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650)— often regarded as the first literary work ever banned— was a pamphlet that argued against [Puritan Calvinist beliefs](#), which upheld that only a pre-selected few would be granted salvation by God.

Using a similar religious pretext, [the Comstock Act](#) (1873) was a Congressional law that made “obscene” literature illegal to possess or send through the mail. During the 100-year period when anti-obscenity laws were enforced, the U.S. Post Office seized and burned printed materials and images for containing “lewd” content. [More than 3,000 people were arrested and served a combined 600 years in prison](#) for violations under the Comstock Act for writing about topics widely accepted today, like homosexuality, sexual and reproductive health, and gender equality. Much like the ideological justification apparent in today’s book bans, the author behind the law, Anthony Comstock, [maintained](#) that these laws were intended to protect young people from “mental and moral danger.”

The history of book censorship in the U.S. is also linked to slavery. The novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) written by Harriet Beecher Stowe became one of the most popular yet contested novels of the 19th century, for its depiction of the human suffering experienced by enslaved people. Due to the book’s characterization of slavery as morally reprehensible, it was viewed as a threat to the antebellum South’s claims that slaves were property, and some consider the book to have influenced the beginning of the Civil War. As a result of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist writings, slave-holding Southern states banned and burned copies of the book and sent a series of threatening letters to the author—one of which [contained the severed ear of a slave](#). Beyond the issue of slavery, there have long been attempts to ban several other written materials that touch on the issue of race, even loosely. *The Rabbits’ Wedding* (1954)— a children’s book— was banned for its depiction of marriage between a white and black rabbit, [because opponents felt it encouraged interracial relationships](#). The [Comics Code](#) made comic books that challenged American views on gender and race obsolete.






Relatedly, some of the first instances of book censorship in public school classrooms came shortly after the Civil War. The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), an organization of women with lineage to Confederate soldiers, played a pivotal role in southern schools adopting revisionist Confederate history in school textbooks and banning books that did not promote pro-Confederacy historical accounts. A 1919 pamphlet titled [“A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books and Reference Books in](#)

[Schools, Colleges, and Libraries](#)” advised school administrators responsible for vetting books [to reject those that were not sympathetic to the Confederacy](#). The brochure also instructed librarians to destroy books that did not conform to their white supremacist doctrine. The impact of the UDC’s miseducation of students is enduring— [many generations of adults alive today](#) received these distorted lessons in schools along with cherry-picked access to books on slavery. Given this, **we must consider how the racist sentiments engendered by this systematic and coordinated miseducation have fueled current opposition against teaching today’s students accurate accounts of race and slavery.** These bans on printed materials related to anti-racism and freedom of thought set the tone for much of the book censorship that we see today.

The Current State of Book Bans

Local, state, and national groups are leading many efforts to restrict access to books in schools. These include national organizations like US Parents Involved in Education, No Left Turn in Education, and Moms for Liberty—which has 200 chapters— as well as local groups like Americans for Prosperity Florida. [Every Library](#), which tracks book ban legislation across states, cites that **146 bills have been introduced in 2023 to prevent students from having the freedom to read and think for themselves.**¹ This includes efforts to: “limit access to school library databases; proposals to establish book rating systems; mandating or prescribing materials challenge policies; efforts to regulate collection development policies; use of parental control policies to limit free speech; changes to obscenity and harmful to minors definitions that preempt First Amendment guarantees; bills that limit or outlaw the teaching of ‘divisive concepts;’ and bills that would criminalize libraries, education, and museums by removing long standing-defense from prosecution exemptions under obscenity laws.” According to PEN America, book bans are most prominent in states with national book censorship group chapters, and/or legislation that has [directly facilitated a book ban or created conditions](#) that condone the intimidation and harassment of educators and school librarians. According to the table below, Florida has the highest number of book bans compared to any state—1,406 for the 2022-23 school year— followed by Texas, Missouri, Utah, and Pennsylvania. In all but one state, state legislation and national parent groups advocating for book bans are present.

¹ Report indicates latest estimates as of June 17, 2023.

STATE	TOTAL NUMBER OF BANS	TOTAL NUMBER OF DISTRICTS WITH INSTANCES OF BOOK BANS	STATE LEGISLATION	PRESENCE OF NATIONAL ADVOCACY GROUPS
 Florida	1,406	33	Yes	Yes
 Texas	625	12	Passed	Yes
 Missouri	333	14	Yes	Yes
 Utah	281	10	Yes	Yes
 Pennsylvania	186	7	No	Yes

Data via [PEN America](#)

However, many states with book bans in place face several legal challenges. In Arkansas, an Obama-appointed judge barred two provisions of [Arkansas Act 372](#) from going into effect. One section of the law would have [criminalized librarians and booksellers](#) for providing access to material deemed “harmful to minors.” Another section would have required public libraries to establish material review processes, whereby review boards would have the authority to [engage in viewpoint and content-based discrimination](#). The law also made book challenges from any individual based on vague and undefined definitions of “appropriateness” permissible. In the [injunction](#), Judge Timothy Brooks warned against the broader implications of the law, opening his ruling with a quote from the book [Fahrenheit 451](#).

“There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches.” -Ray Bradbury

Additionally, Texas’ [Restricting Explicit and Adult-Designated Educational Resources \(READER\) Act](#) would give the Governor’s appointed State Library Commission and Education Agency full authority to create standards for literary materials in public school libraries, as well as the authority to review and rate all books sold in a school for “sexually explicit content.” In effect, this would grant government-endorsed censorship of literature and, [according to librarians and legal experts](#), potentially “ensnare books that are not inappropriate” and “restrict the learning and growth of

students whose experiences may not be reflected in the books that would remain.” The legislation was initially blocked by a Trump-appointed federal district judge, who ruled that the bill [violated the First Amendment](#). However, last month, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued an [administrative stay](#) on this ruling. This means the State can enforce the READER Act until the Appeals Court fully considers the case.

Federal Legislative Response to Book Bans

Additionally, there is a push at the federal level to censor what children can read in schools. [The Parents Bill of Rights \(PBOR\) Act](#) (H.R. 5) by Rep. Julia Letlow (R-5-LA), which passed the House in March, requires schools to make classroom curricula publicly available and provide parents with a list of reading materials in school libraries. As the National Education Association (NEA) notes, several of the provisions outlined in the bill to protect parent engagement of their child’s education are [already in place](#) due to local and state laws. Moreover, according to an [August 2023 GBAO poll](#), a majority of parents ranked pandemic learning recovery, lack of school funding, lack of technical training, insufficient mental health support, and educator shortages as the most serious problems facing K-12 public education. The same poll found that parents were more concerned about bans and restrictions on books and students not getting a complete, honest history of our country than students being taught “critical race theory” or not having enough say in required books. Hence, efforts to genuinely engage parents’ interest in school learning remain largely unaddressed and ignored in the Parent Bill of Rights.

Republican lawmakers have also attempted to use federal funding as a cudgel for a federally mandated book ban. The [No Obscene Teaching \(NOT\) in Our Schools Act](#) (H.R. 5303) by Rep. Mark Green (R-7-TN) would reduce federal funding to schools found to promote “harmful” materials to minors, according to state laws. In the Fiscal Year (FY) [2024 Labor, Health and Human Services \(LHHS\) bill](#), House Republicans propose cuts to several key education programs that promote diversity and equity. This includes prohibiting the implementation of the Biden Administration’s [Executive Orders on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion \(DEI\)](#) and prohibiting the use of any funds by the Department of Education to promote or advance “critical race theory.” Though this bill has not passed the full House, the appropriations bill will be considered as Congress approaches the November 17th deadline for the latest [Continuing Resolution](#). These attempts to withhold funds from schools that do not acquiesce to school censorship are not only harmful in the sense that they would likely cause further disruptions and hurdles to recovering [student learning losses](#) during COVID-19, but they would exacerbate existing [inequities in school funding](#) and ultimately harm children by imposing restraints on their access to ideas and information.

Supporting Students' Freedom to Read

Even with pending court cases and legislation from lawmakers, there is established legal precedence on book censorship and freedom of expression in schools. The landmark case [Tinker v. Des Moines \(1969\)](#) cemented students' rights to free speech in public schools. In [Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico \(1982\)](#), a high school senior, Steven Pico, joined four other students in challenging their school board's decision to remove books a parent's group deemed "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy." The Supreme Court held that the First Amendment limits the power of junior high and high school officials to remove books from school libraries because they dislike the ideas contained in them. The outcome of the case also highlights the desire many students have to access various information, thoughts, and ideas in school libraries and classrooms. This sentiment is echoed by the [growing number of student groups](#) who have filed lawsuits against their school districts for book bans and coordinated national efforts to resist the censorship of school books. Across the country, [dozens of student-led groups](#) and Banned Books Clubs mobilized against book bans. **Since students are the most impacted by book bans, it is essential to uplift the advocacy efforts of student groups fighting for their right to read narratives that speak to their identities and curiosities about the world around them.**

Moreover, several parent advocacy groups, like the [Round Rock Black Parents Association](#) and [Moms for Libros](#), are proactively fighting school censorship. The parents in these groups represent a larger percentage of students in public schools, where minorities account for [more than half](#) of students. Yet their voices have largely been excluded in the national conversation on book bans. Other organizations, like MoveOn, are [challenging book bans](#) by distributing some of the most frequently banned books throughout states most impacted by bans.

States in Support of the Freedom to Read: Illinois and California

Two states have also enacted legislation in support of students' freedom to read. In June, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker signed [HB 2789](#) into law, which "protects the freedom of libraries to acquire materials without external limitations." The legislation requires Illinois' top Library officials to adopt the American Library Association's [Library Bill of Rights](#) statewide, which states that reading materials cannot be removed or restricted due to partisan or personal disapproval. Additionally, Governor Pritzker included \$1.6 million in the FY24 state budget for statewide implementation of Dolly Parton's [Imagination Library](#)—a program that mails free books to children from birth to age five, regardless of a family's income. In California—which enrolls more K-12 students than any other state—Governor Gavin Newsom signed [AB 1078](#)

into law, which bars book bans and textbook censorship. The measure prohibits school boards from “banning instructional materials or library books on the basis that they provide inclusive and diverse perspectives.” Over the past two years, the state has also invested \$4.1 billion to convert one in four schools into [community schools](#), where school districts work closely with teachers, students, families, and local community partners to foster deeper collaborative involvement in students’ education.

Additionally, the Biden Administration is set to investigate book bans federally. In September, the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) [appointed a coordinator](#) tasked with investigating book censorship in schools across the country, especially those targeting LGBTQ+ individuals and other protected groups. This is particularly important as book restrictions targeting BIPOC and queer authors continue to escalate, restricting students’ rights to explore their identities, histories, and communities. [Some scholars have argued](#) that a lack of exposure to multicultural education can lead to increased instances of identity-based bullying, discrimination, and violence in schools. Moreover, lack of representation in school classrooms and libraries can negatively impact student outcomes and children’s perceptions of their own identities. According to a [2021 GLSEN School Climate Survey](#), **less than a fifth of LGBTQ+ students reported that LGBTQ+-related topics were included in textbooks or other assigned readings, and under half of students (42.8%) reported being able to find information about LGBTQ+-related issues in their school library.** The survey found that students in schools with an LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum were less likely to experience harassment, performed better academically, were more likely to pursue post-secondary education, and reported better psychological well-being and a sense of belonging, than those without an LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum.

Additionally, some Congressional lawmakers have taken steps to ensure that school districts harbor safe and inclusive environments for all students, including those identifying as LGBTQ+. [The Safe Schools Improvement Act](#) (H.R 4402) by Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-38-CA) would require schools to adopt codes of conduct prohibiting bullying and harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion. [The Right to Read Act](#) (H.R 2889) by Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-7-AZ) would protect educators who provide diverse and inclusive curricular materials to students, support the development of effective school libraries, and [increase federal investments in literacy programs](#) that are critical to students in high-need communities. The bill would also require state and local education agencies to provide assurances that the constitutional rights of students are protected by allowing access to a variety of reading materials in school libraries.

Still, lawmakers can take more proactive steps to embrace expanding opportunities for learning and cultural understanding in student classrooms. It is imperative that school and district leaders feel empowered to make informed decisions about reading materials that rely on a process of evaluating the merits of complaints about a book's appropriateness. Accordingly, it is critical that these decisions not rely wholly on complaints from one or two parents who find a book's content morally or personally objectionable, but on collaborative input from parents, educators, and students.

For example, in response to the rise in book bans in New York, the NYCLU designed a [model policy for reconsidering curricular materials](#). The model policy would create district-wide committees consisting of an administrator, a librarian, two teachers, a reading or content specialist, two parents, and two high school students to review curricular and library materials challenges. The committee would be tasked with recommending to the school board whether to retain or remove a book, and the school board would vote to adopt or reject the committee's recommendation. This model is distinct from [current book review committees](#) in states that have implemented book bans, where committee membership often consists of parents appointed by partisan school board members.

Conclusion

Freedom of ideas and expression is a cornerstone of American democracy. Increased assaults on education and perspectives presented in books treat cultural understanding and empathy as a threat and can promote siloed thinking and perspectives that ultimately restrict students from expanding their viewpoints. Not only can taking away students' access to knowledge and education lead to a culture of fear, where children are unable to understand each other's differences, but it eliminates the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of thought and expression. This has broader implications for American democracy, given that the practice of widespread book banning globally, is commonly linked to [larger anti-democratic movements worldwide](#).

In the current landscape of book bans, [shelves of books](#) are under review due to restrictions on classroom discussions and topics deemed "contentious." Yet, the lessons in these books could be used to facilitate greater awareness and discussion of cultural differences. As the country and public school systems continue to diversify, it remains crucial that educators, parents, and students understand the importance of representation in literature, as well as the broader implications of school censorship.