

# Book Ban Efforts Spread Across the U.S.

Challenges to books about sexual and racial identity are nothing new in American schools, but the tactics and politicization are.

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In Wyoming, a county prosecutor's office considered charges against library employees for stocking books like "Sex Is a Funny Word" and "This Book Is Gay."

In Oklahoma, a bill was introduced in the State Senate that would prohibit public school libraries from keeping books on hand that focus on sexual activity, sexual identity or gender identity.

In Tennessee, the McMinn County Board of Education voted to remove the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel "Maus" from an eighth-grade module on the Holocaust because of nudity and curse words.

Parents, activists, school board officials and lawmakers around the country are challenging books at a pace not seen in decades. The American Library Association said in a preliminary report that it received an "unprecedented" 330 reports of book challenges, each of which can include multiple books, last fall.

"It's a pretty startling phenomenon here in the United States to see book bans back in style, to see efforts to press criminal charges against school librarians," said Suzanne Nossel, the chief executive of the free-speech organization PEN America, even if efforts to press charges have so far failed.

Such challenges have long been a staple of school board meetings, but it isn't just their frequency that has changed, according to educators, librarians and free-speech advocates — it is also the tactics behind them and the venues where they play out. Conservative groups in particular, fueled by social media, are now pushing the challenges into statehouses, law enforcement and political races.

"The politicalization of the topic is what's different than what I've seen in the past," said Britten Follett, the chief executive of content at Follett School Solutions, one of the country's largest providers of books to K-12 schools. "It's being driven by legislation, it's being driven by politicians aligning with one side or the other. And in the end, the librarian, teacher or educator is getting caught in the middle."

Among the most frequent targets are books about race, gender and sexuality, like George M. Johnson's "All Boys Aren't Blue," Jonathan Evison's "Lawn Boy," Maia Kobabe's "Gender Queer" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye."

“I didn’t know that was something you could do, file a criminal complaint against a book,” said George Johnson, author of the memoir “All Boys Aren’t Blue.” Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times

Several books are drawing fire repeatedly in different parts of the country — “All Boys Aren’t Blue” has been targeted for removal in at least 14 states — in part because objections that have surfaced in recent months often originate online. Many parents have seen Google docs or spreadsheets of contentious titles posted on Facebook by local chapters of organizations such as Moms for Liberty. From there, librarians say, parents ask their schools if those books are available to their children.

“If you look at the lists of books being targeted, it’s so broad,” Ms. Nossel said. Some groups, she noted, have essentially weaponized book lists meant to promote more diverse reading material, taking those lists and then pushing for all the included titles to be banned.

The advocacy group No Left Turn in Education maintains lists of books it says are “used to spread radical and racist ideologies to students,” including Howard Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States” and Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale.” Those who are demanding certain books be removed insist this is an issue of parental rights and choice, that all parents should be free to direct the upbringing of their own children.

Others say prohibiting these titles altogether violates the rights of other parents and the rights of children who believe access to these books is important. Many school libraries already have mechanisms in place to stop individual students from checking out books of which their parents disapprove.

The author Laurie Halse Anderson, whose young adult books have frequently been challenged, said that pulling titles that deal with difficult subjects can make it harder for students to discuss issues like racism and sexual assault.

“By attacking these books, by attacking the authors, by attacking the subject matter, what they are doing is removing the possibility for conversation,” she said. “You are laying the groundwork for increasing bullying, disrespect, violence and attacks.”

Tiffany Justice, a former school board member in Indian River County, Fla., and a founder of Moms for Liberty, said that parents should not be vilified for asking if a book is appropriate. Some of the books being challenged involve sexual activity, including oral sex and anal sex, she said, and children are not ready for that kind of material.

“There are different stages of development of sexuality in our lives, and when that’s disrupted, it can have horrible long-term effects,” she said.

“The bottom line is if parents are concerned about something, politicians need to pay attention,” Ms. Justice added. “2022 will be a year of the parent at the ballot box.”

Christopher M. Finan, the executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship, said he has not seen this level of challenges since the 1980s, when a similarly energized conservative base embraced the issue. This time, however, that energy is colliding with an effort to publish and circulate more diverse books, as well as social media, which can amplify complaints about certain titles.

“Sex Is a Funny Word” is among the books being challenged. Triangle Square Press, via Associated Press

“It’s this confluence of tensions that have always existed over what’s the proper thing to teach kids,” Mr. Finan said. “These same issues are really coming alive in a new social environment,” he added, “and it’s a mess. It’s a real mess.”

Book challenges aren’t just coming from the right: “Of Mice and Men” and “To Kill a Mockingbird,” for example, have been challenged over the years for how they address race, and both were among the library association’s 10 most-challenged books in 2020.

In the Mukilteo School District in Washington State, the school board voted to remove “To Kill a Mockingbird” — voted the best book of the past 125 years in a survey of readers conducted by The New York Times Book Review — from the ninth-grade curriculum at the request of staff members. Their objections included arguments that the novel marginalized characters of color, celebrated “white saviorhood” and used racial slurs dozens of times without addressing their derogatory nature.

While the book is no longer a requirement, it remains on the district’s list of approved novels, and teachers can still choose to assign it if they wish.

In other instances, efforts to ban books are more sweeping, as parents and organizations aim to have them removed from libraries, cutting off access for everyone. Perhaps no book has been targeted more vigorously than “The 1619 Project,” a best seller about slavery in America that has drawn wide support among many historians and Black

leaders and which arose from the 2019 special issue of The New York Times Magazine. It has been named explicitly in proposed legislation.

### What Is the 1619 Project?

**Acknowledging a historic moment.** In August 2019, The New York Times Magazine launched the 1619 Project, spearheaded by Nikole Hannah-Jones. The project explored the history of slavery in the United States and was released to coincide with the anniversary of a ship carrying the first enslaved Africans to the English colonies.

Political leaders on the right have seized on the controversies over books. The newly elected governor of Virginia, Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, rallied his supporters by framing book bans as an issue of parental control and highlighted the issue in a campaign ad featuring a mother who wanted Toni Morrison's "Beloved" to be removed from her son's high school curriculum.

In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott demanded that the state's education agency "investigate any criminal activity in our public schools involving the availability of pornography," a move that librarians in the state fear could make them targets of criminal complaints. The governor of South Carolina asked the state's superintendent of education and its law enforcement division to investigate the presence of "obscene and pornographic" materials in its public schools, offering "Gender Queer" as an example.

The mayor of Ridgeland, Miss., recently withheld funding from the Madison County Library System, saying he would not release the money until books with L.G.B.T.Q. themes were removed, according to the library system's executive director.

George M. Johnson, the author of "All Boys Aren't Blue," a memoir about growing up Black and queer, was stunned in November to learn that a school board member in Flagler County, Fla., had filed a complaint with the sheriff's department against the book. Written for readers aged 14 and older, it includes scenes that depict oral and anal sex and sexual assault.

"I didn't know that was something you could do, file a criminal complaint against a book," Johnson said in an interview. The complaint was dismissed by the sheriff's office, but the book was subsequently removed from school libraries while it was reviewed by a committee.

At a school board meeting where the book was debated, a group of students protested the ban and distributed free copies, while counterprotesters assailed it as pornography and occasionally screamed obscenities and anti-gay slurs, according to a student who organized the protest and posted video footage of the event.

Johnson made a video appearance at the meeting and argued that the memoir contained valuable lessons about consent and that it highlighted difficult issues that teenagers are likely to encounter in their lives.

A district committee reviewed the book and determined it was "appropriate for use" in high school libraries, but the decision was overruled by the county superintendent, who told the school board that "All Boys Aren't Blue" would be kept out of libraries, while new policies are created to allow parents to have more control over which books their children can access. Several other young adult titles that had been challenged and removed were restored.

Jack Petocz, a 17-year-old student at Flagler Palm Coast High School who organized the protest against the book ban, said that removing books about L.G.B.T.Q. characters and books about racism was discriminatory, and harmful to students who may already feel that they are in the minority and that their experiences are rarely represented in literature.

Jack Petocz with the book "All Boys Aren't Blue" at his home in Florida. Todd Anderson for The New York Times

"As a gay student myself, those books are so critical for youth, for feeling there are resources for them," he said, noting that books that portray heterosexual romances are rarely challenged. "I felt it was very discriminatory."

So far, efforts to bring criminal charges against librarians and educators have largely faltered, as law enforcement officials in Florida, Wyoming and elsewhere have found no basis for criminal investigations. And courts have generally taken the position that libraries should not remove books from circulation.

Nonetheless, librarians say that just the threat of having to defend against charges is enough to get many educators to censor themselves by not stocking the books to begin with. Even just the public spectacle of an accusation can be enough.

"It will certainly have a chilling effect," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's office for intellectual freedom. "You live in a community where you've been for 28 years, and all of a sudden you might be charged with the crime of pandering obscenity. And you'd hoped to stay in that community forever."

She said that aggressively policing books for inappropriate content and banning titles could limit students' exposure to great literature, including towering canonical works.

"If you focus on five passages, you've got obscenity," Ms. Caldwell-Stone said. "If you broaden your view and read the work as a whole, you've got Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'"