

BOOK BANNING IN THE U.S.

**What's Happening, Why It's Important, and What
You Can Do to Fight Back**



BOOKS BANS ARE THREATENING OUR COMMUNITIES



In recent years, we have seen the endemic resurgence of book censorship in state and local governments across the United States. Banning access to books and literacy has long been used as a tool in the white supremacist war against marginalized communities.

This booklet lays out the current state of book bans in the United States and highlights the many devastating ways censorship impacts us all. It additionally includes a concrete list of actions anyone can take, with direct links to resources for combatting the right's ongoing attempt to inhibit people's right to read freely. We encourage everyone to use this guide to educate yourselves and others about the consequences of book bans and the steps you can take to oppose censorship in your own communities and beyond.

What Is a Book Ban?

PEN America defines a school book ban as “any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished.” Book bans can be sorted into multiple categories, including titles banned in classrooms, titles banned in libraries, or titles that are otherwise removed for a temporary or permanent period of time as the result of an objection.

Books bans are different from the regular curriculum review performed by professionals in the education field or initial evaluations from a teacher or school district about which books will be available for students to access. A ban results when a challenger overrides the selections made by educators and librarians to inhibit a book’s accessibility. Many of these bans affect vital books that would otherwise introduce young readers to new ideas and provide them solace in reading narratives similar to their own. Specifically, the American Library Association notes that the majority of these attacks specifically target titles by Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ authors.



What Is a "Wholesale Ban"?

In addition to book banners targeting individual titles, many states have enacted what PEN America refers to as “wholesale bans,” where schools are forced to either permanently or temporarily suspend, close, or empty entire classrooms and libraries of books. Much of this restriction is due to new laws in a growing number of states that require librarians and other educators to submit all the titles in their spaces for public scrutiny. Should they fail to do this within the allotted time period, they could face punishment from the law.

THE ATTACKS ARE GROWING

PEN America's most recent [Banned in the USA](#) report covering the fall 2022 semester finds:

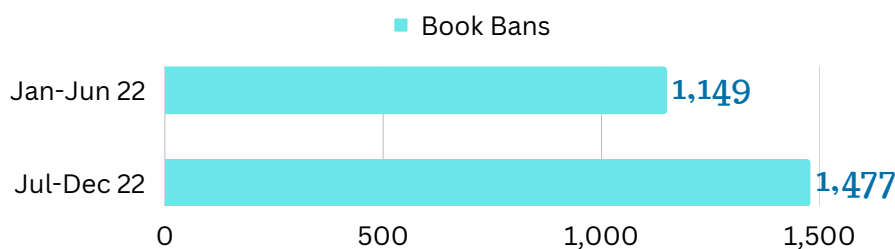
1,477

instances of individual
books banned

874

unique titles
affected

This is a **28%** increase from the number of bans recorded during the first half of 2022.



Read the full report here:



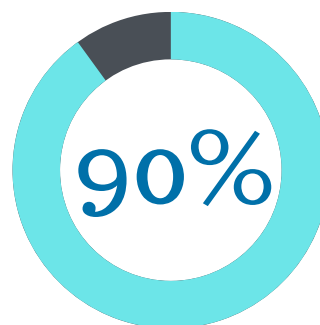
The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracks an even larger number of reports of challenges and attempted bans in 2022.

2,571

unique titles were
challenged in 2022

1,269

attempts to restrict library
material in 2022



of these were part of attempts to
censor multiple titles

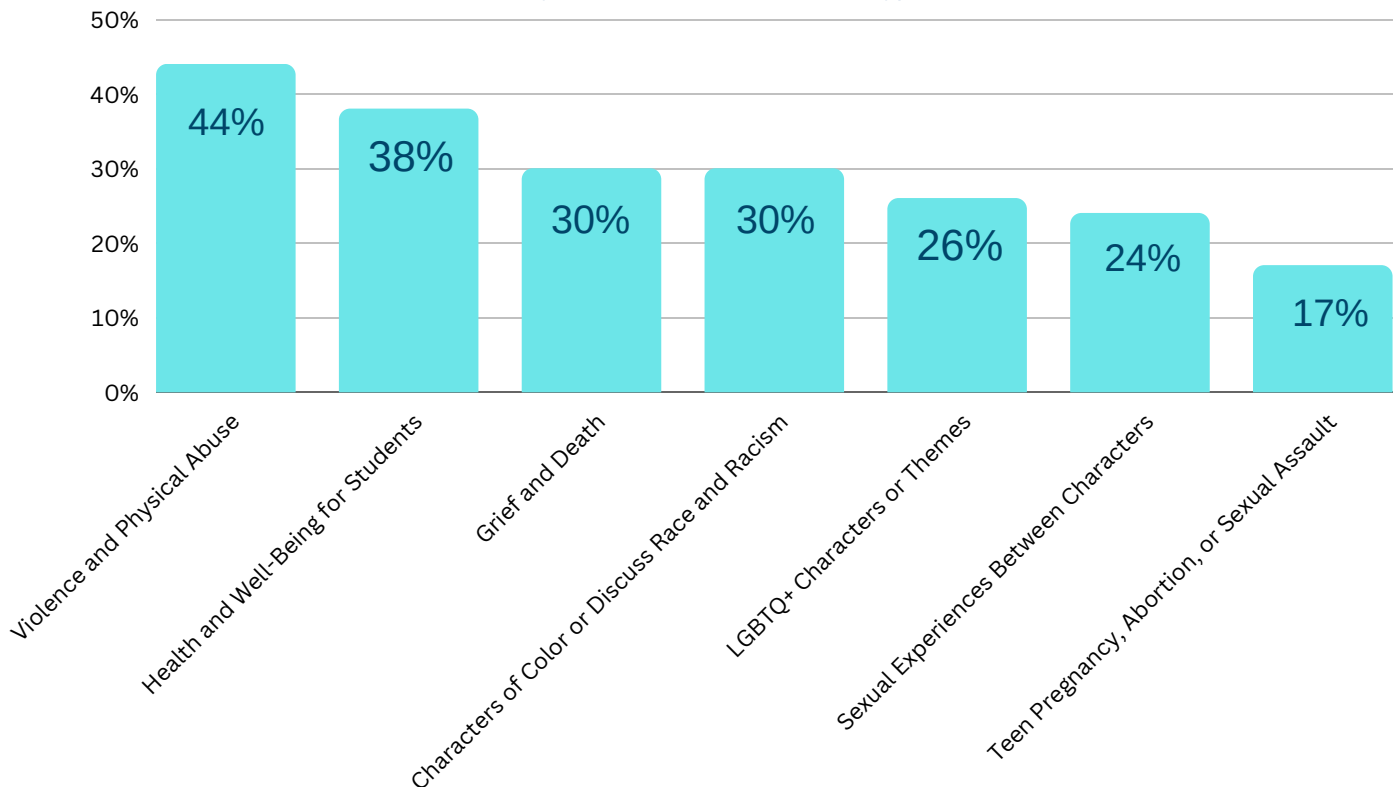
Which Books Are Being Targeted?

PEN America's fall 2022 report notes that book bans continue to overwhelmingly target books by and about BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and they are also increasingly impacting other content categories as well.

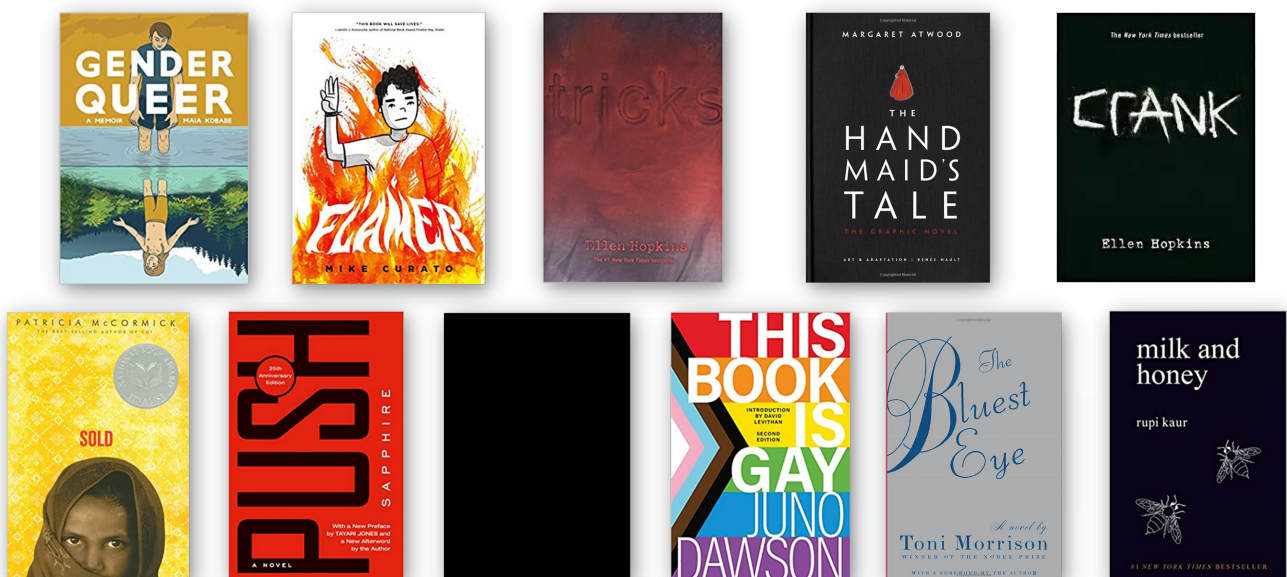
Subjects Banned July-December 2022

Data from PEN America Index of School Book Bans

*Note that many titles contain more than one type of content



Top 11 Banned Books of 2022

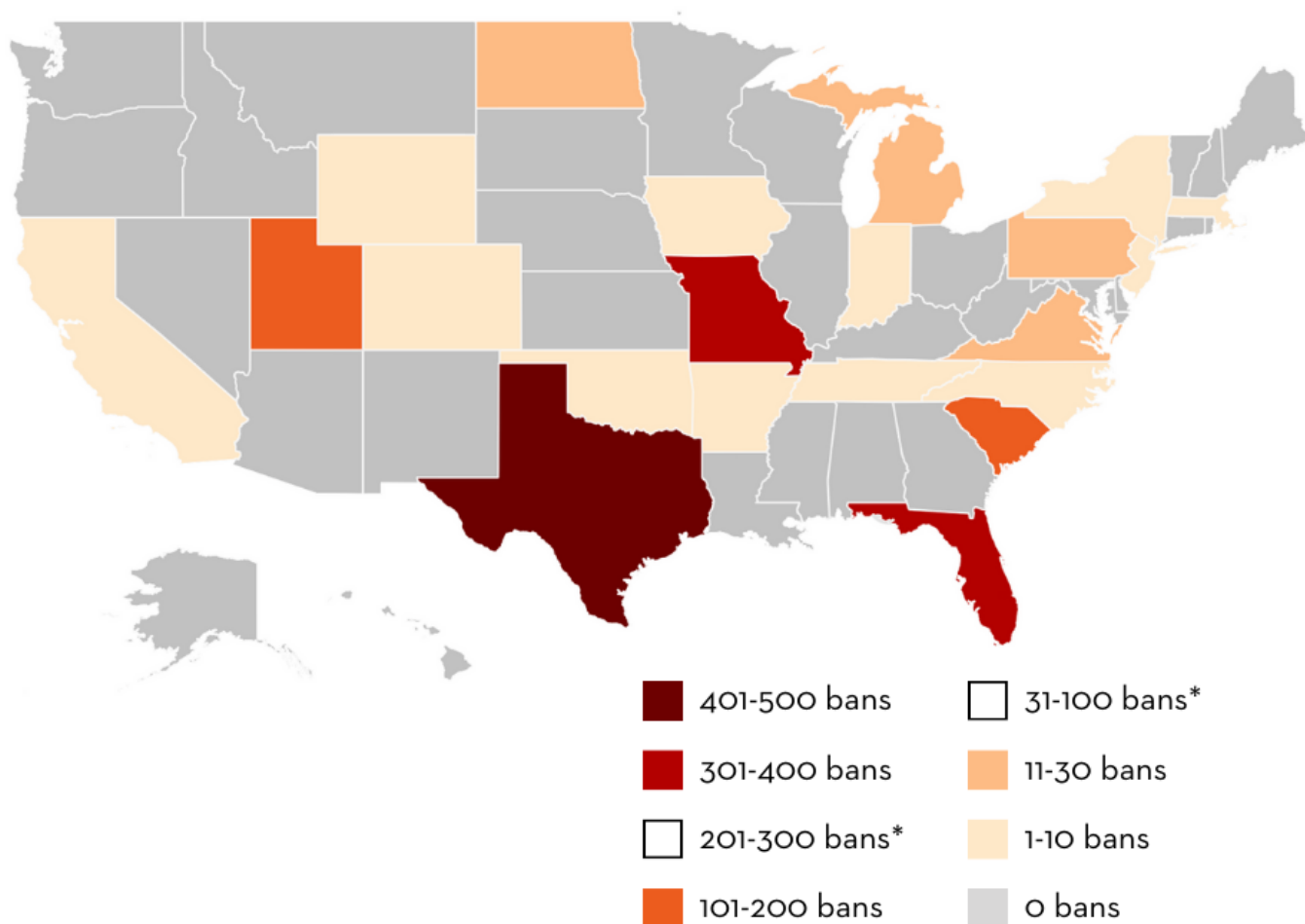


Where Is It Happening?

PEN America records that instances of individual bans occurred across 21 states in 66 school districts between July and December 2022. These bans were mainly concentrated in a handful of states: Texas, Florida, Missouri, Utah, and South Carolina.

School book bans by state

in the first half of the 2022-2023 school year



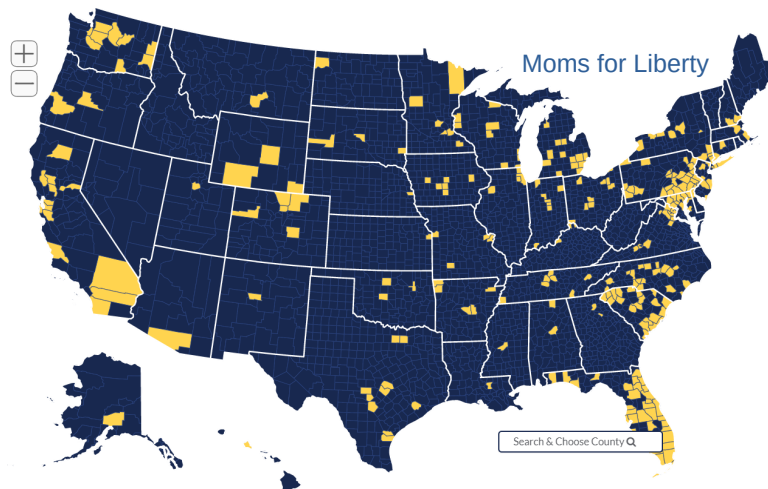
*There are no states with 31-100 bans and 201-300 bans

Data from PEN America Index of School Book Bans, July 1, 2022 - December 31, 2022.

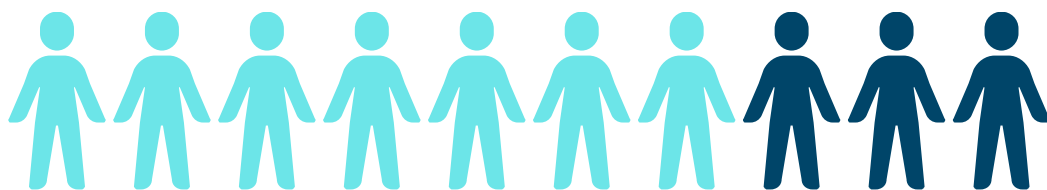
Who Is Behind These Bans?

It is a common misconception that book banning is largely the result of disparate individuals in communities calling for a particular title to be removed. In their latest report, PEN America found that “of the 1,477 reported book ban cases this school year, 74% are connected to organized efforts, mainly of advocacy groups; elected officials; or enacted legislation.” This surge in book censorship is part of a growing campaign in recent years to limit the books students can access in public schools. Many bans stem from the aggressive actions of state lawmakers, who use intimidation tactics to pressure school districts into banning titles, as well as enact new legislation that greatly restricts the content allowed to be accessed in schools.

Another significant set of players driving this rapid increase in book banning are the numerous, organized advocacy groups that have emerged at national, state, and local levels to push for book restrictions. One such group, Moms for Liberty, has over 200 chapters and “is connected to 58% of all advocacy-led book bans around the country” (PEN America). Many of these organizations justify their claims for censorship on the basis of religion or parental rights, and a sizeable portion also specifically advocate for the prohibition of books and other educational materials that discuss race or LGBTQIA+ identities.



Despite their outspokenness, groups like Moms for Liberty are in the **minority**



70% of parents oppose book banning

*Data from PEN America Index of School Book Bans

Why Do Book Bans Matter?

You may be wondering, why is it so concerning for titles to be banned from school libraries? Can't students simply access these books outside of school environments?

Unfortunately, in many cases, the answer to this second question is no. Not everyone can easily access public libraries or afford to purchase books on their own. School libraries and public schools therefore play a fundamental role in supporting literacy and providing young people with materials to deepen their understanding of the world. Book bans sabotage these very goals by censoring certain perspectives and removing narratives largely by authors of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals, which are vital to understanding our past, present, and future. This heightened surge of book banning is also already expanding beyond school libraries, increasingly impacting public libraries and booksellers across the country as well.

"In our pluralistic and democratic society, every book has its reader, and professional educators and librarians connect youth with those books that nurture literacy, critical thinking, and other skills and dispositions necessary for future success."

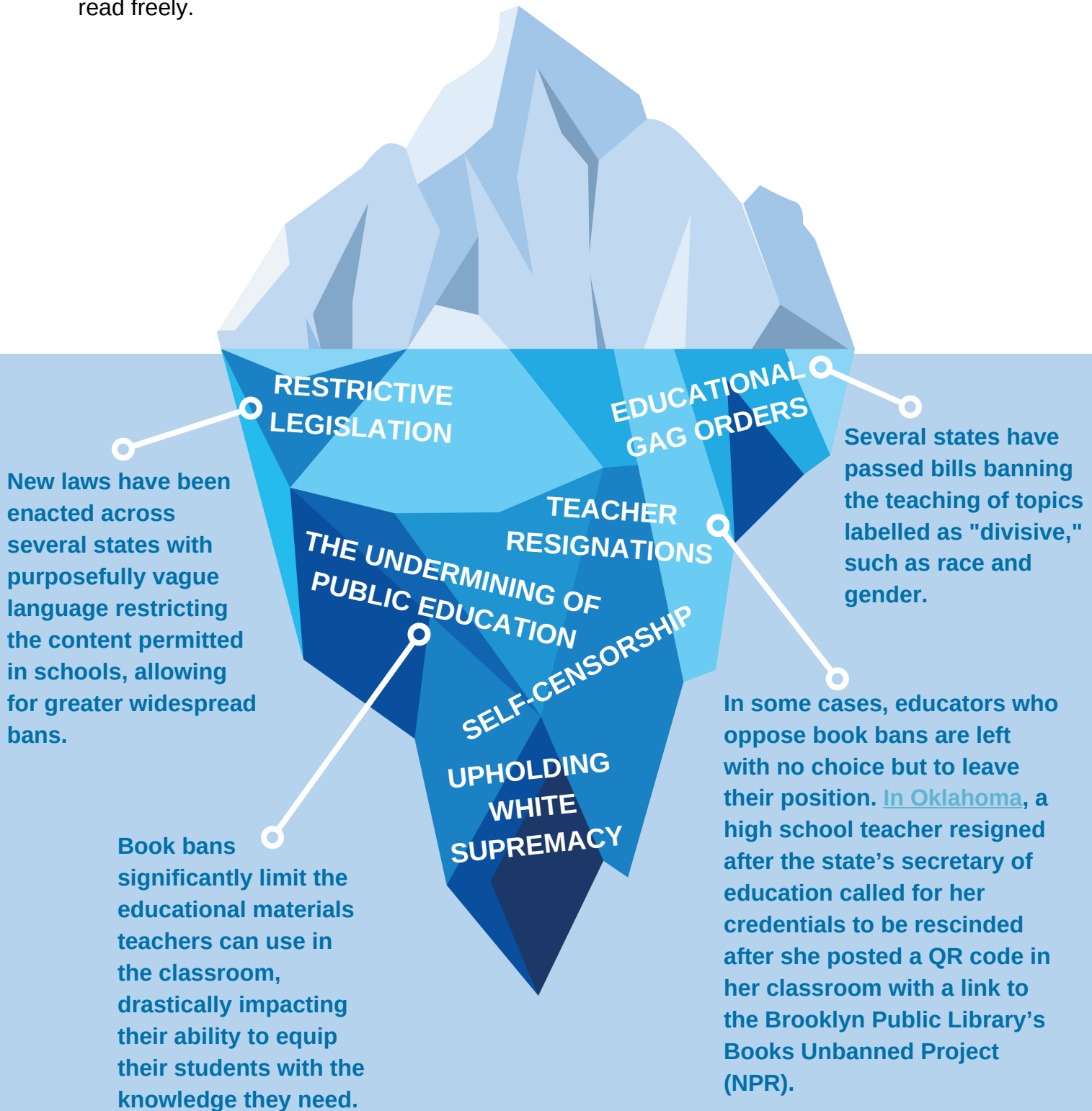
Empowered by Reading
The Benefits of Giving Youth Access to a
Wide Variety of Reading Materials

 **Unite
Against
Book Bans**

In this way, the current flood of book censorship threatens our democracy by inhibiting individuals' ability to make their own decisions about what to read and believe. In order for freedom of speech and expression to exist in a democracy, its citizens must have ready access to different viewpoints and information. This right applies to children as well as adults. Parents should have a say in their child's education, but they do not have the right to make decisions for other people's children and limit the stories other children are allowed to read. Public schools and libraries provide a forum for inquiry and exploration, and students have a constitutional right to be able to access a full wealth of ideas and information inside them.

THE CONSEQUENCES ARE DANGEROUS

The major headlines about book bans are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the devastating impact censorship has on our society. There are also many less visible—but equally insidious—consequences that emerge as a result of restricting people's ability to read freely.



The Quiet Cost of Book Bans: Self-Censorship

These recent years of increased bans, challenges, and legislation limiting or removing titles from classrooms and school libraries have led to the growth of a deeply concerning but far less traceable kind of restriction: self-censorship. Self-censorship, or so-called soft censorship, refers to when teachers, librarians, or other academic administrators preemptively remove, alter, or choose not to select certain titles for their educational spaces out of fear of a potential ban or backlash. Given growing hostility from censorship advocacy groups and increasingly restrictive legislation around the kinds of material allowed in schools, many educators have begun to increasingly err on the side of caution when selecting titles to avoid possible controversy.

These concerns about the repercussions for including these titles are in many cases warranted. In a growing number of states, educators can face harsh punishment, legal charges, or even put their own safety at risk by including certain books or topics in their catalog or curriculum. [Kelly Jensen from Book Riot](#) reports that during the month of March 2023, “several libraries have faced bomb and shooting threats as a direct result of the books housed in their collections.” Self-censorship is particularly troubling because, despite the immense impact it has on the books available to a community, it remains almost impossible to track.

Book Bans Uphold White Supremacy

Books bans are part of an ongoing attempt by the right to silence the voices of marginalized groups in the United States. By restricting access to books by BIPOC authors that center BIPOC experiences, book banners seek to bolster white supremacist narratives by distorting the truth of history and the lived experiences of numerous communities. Not only do all young people deserve to see themselves in the books they read, but also literature plays a vital role in deepening their understanding of complex issues. Students across the United States need to have access to informational resources that address topics such as racism, Black American history, and other related concepts in their schools.



WHAT IS BEACON DOING?

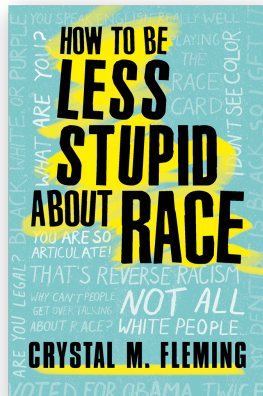
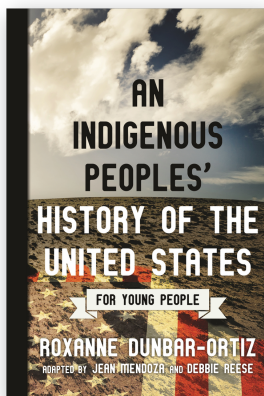


As one of the country's oldest publishers, Beacon Press has always succeeded in shining a light on injustice in the most repressive of times—and the right's current “anti-woke” hysteria has only strengthened our resolve and commitment.

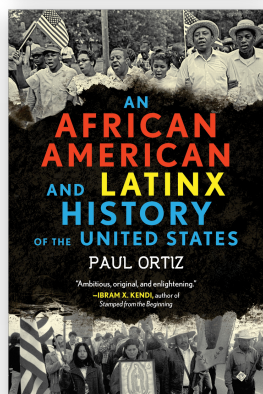
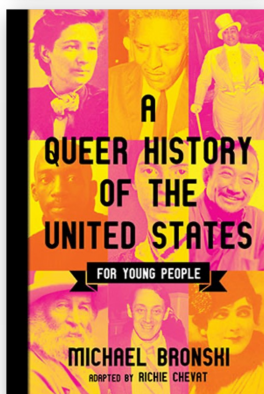
We will continue publishing books that confront the complex history of this country and lift up marginalized voices, particularly Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ authors, whose work, according to the American Library Association (ALA), represents the majority of banned books. We are also passionate about supporting teachers, librarians, and readers who are on the front lines in protecting the freedom to read.

We are offering some of our eBooks for free to anyone who has any trouble accessing them.

Download our free eBooks here:



In 2022, Beacon announced a K-12 Banned Book Giveaway, in which we offered up to five copies each of titles including *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People*, *White Fragility*, *How to Be Less Stupid About Race*, *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*, and *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* to schools across the country.

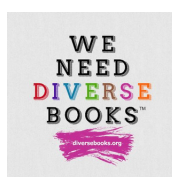


We received almost 1,600 individual requests for books from educators, librarians, and educational administrators and sent out approximately 25,000 books.

DON'T WAIT TO TAKE ACTION!

1 Stay updated and share information with others

These organizations all provide comprehensive information, statistics, and other resources on censorship occurring throughout the U.S. and what you can do to help combat it.



2 Identify book-banning groups and censorship attempts near you



Censorship Group Database:



Index of School Book Bans:

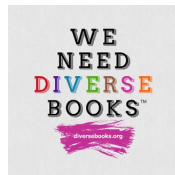


Youth Censorship Database:



3 Report censorship

Notify these organizations about censorship occurring in your communities.



4 BE LOUD

Contact school and library administrators, sign petitions, reach out to local media, and attend your local school board meetings to speak out against challenges.



Contact Decision Makers:



Letter to Legislator Template:



Sign the Petition:



Rationale Database for Challenged Texts:



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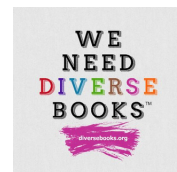
Join a campaign



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Organize in your community

These toolkits provide step-by-step guidance on how to fight against book challenges.



More Resources



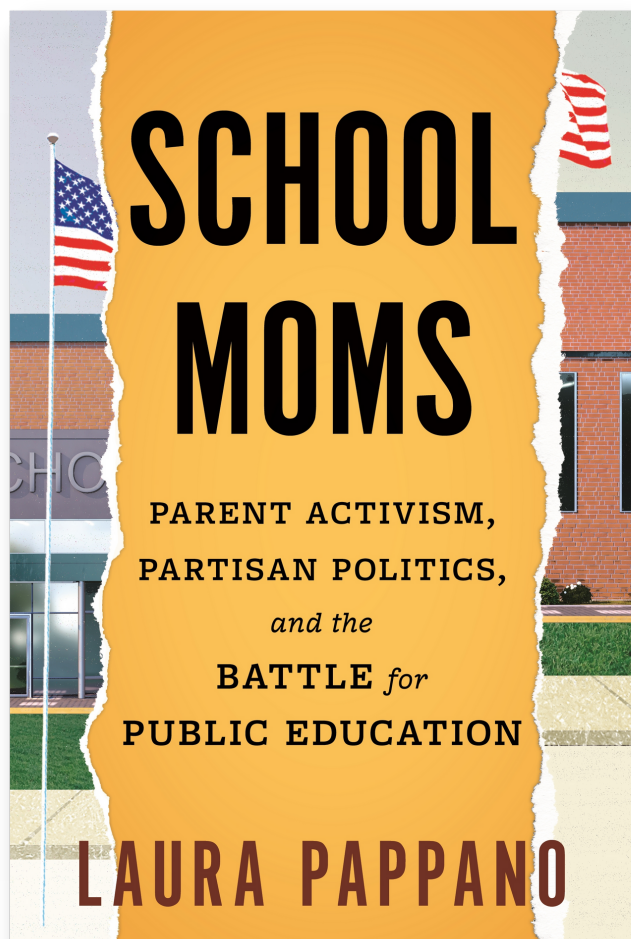
Brooklyn Public Library Books Unbanned Initiative



Penguin Random House Banned Books Resource Hub

7

Expand your reading list



Learn how to fight against the far-right attacks on public school education

In *School Moms*, veteran journalist Laura Pappano combines on-the-ground reporting with research and expert interviews to look at how public schools across the country have become ground zero in a cultural and political war as the far-right has made efforts to seek power over school boards.

Weaving the stories of geographically, racially, and politically diverse groups, Pappano provides examples of grassroots organizing and activism to take a hard look at where these battles are happening, what is at stake, and why it matters for the future of our schools.

ON SALE 1/30/2024

"Support for public schools — like the attacks on them — don't happen by accident. We have decisions to make individually and collectively. "

— Laura Pappano

Further Reading

VICE News: "A Far-Right Moms Group Is Terrorizing Schools in the Name of Protecting Kids"



PEN America: "Q&A with Burbank Unified School District Students"

NCAC: "Claudia Johnson Shares Thoughts on the Right to Read"



them: "Some Florida Teachers Are Removing Books from Classrooms Due to New State Law"

SLJ: "Not Quite Banned: Soft Censorship That Makes LGBTQIA+ Stories Disappear"



NPR: "An Oklahoma Teacher Gave Her Students Access to Banned Books. Now She's Under Scrutiny"

Book Riot: "Soft and Quiet: Self-Censorship in an Era of Book Challenges"



LDF: "Anti-CRT Mania and Book Bans Are the Latest Tactics to Halt Racial Justice"