

CENSORSHIP NEWS



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IN THE NEWS: LGBTQ CENSORSHIP

As first responders to censorship at schools and libraries across the country, the National Coalition Against Censorship tracks trends in the types of speech most likely to be challenged. Through a combination of attacks on books in schools, state legislative proposals, and event protests and cancellations, the availability of LGBTQ stories to young people is under threat across the United States.

The American Library Association's top banned and challenged books lists show a clear trajectory: Beginning in 2015, the year that *Obergefell v. Hodges* opened the door to the federal legalization of same-sex marriage, LGBTQ stories doubled from twenty to forty percent of the list and have ranged from forty to fifty-five percent ever since. Challenges to LGBTQ books in schools and libraries often cite "sexually explicit" content. However, the books challenged include stories as G-rated as a fairy tale prince falling in love with a knight or the kind of early sexual discovery found in much contemporary teen literature. Or even the story of two male penguins who adopt an egg.

Part of a strong education is the exposure to diverse viewpoints, ideas and experiences. Opponents of LGBTQ stories do our youth a disservice by trying to block their access to information.

NATIONAL GROUPS CONDEMN INCREASING ATTACKS ON LGBTQ BOOKS

Books featuring LGBTQ characters and issues are under attack in schools and libraries across the United States. When public schools or libraries yield to pressure to remove, red-flag or limit access to these books, they undermine free speech principles, further isolate LGBTQ youth and deprive all young people of opportunities to increase their empathy and respect for differences.

Half of the ten most frequently challenged books in 2018 told queer stories, depicting same-sex relationships or trans and non-binary experiences in a variety of ways, tailored to readers of all age ranges. Critics denounce these books as “pornographic” and label them “obscene,” even when they contain no descriptions of sexual conduct. (One of the most challenged books of the past two decades, *And Tango Makes Three*, tells the story of two male penguins adopting an egg to create a family in a zoo.) Special interest groups have also threatened violence in efforts to shut down events like the Drag Queen Story Hour and readings by trans authors.

When LGBTQ stories are silenced in this way, LGBTQ youth and children from LGBTQ families get the message that their own stories—their very lives—do not have value, that they are shameful. However, reading stories that acknowledge their experiences, in which they can recognize themselves

and their families, reinforces their sense of self-worth and helps them overcome feelings of social marginalization.

At a time when LGBTQ youth are being bullied, and suffer from depression and attempt suicide at higher rates than other students, LGBTQ books play a crucial role in educational efforts to encourage respect for differences. They have the power to save lives.

Parents who object to specific books in schools may ask for alternate assignments for their own children. What they cannot, and must not be permitted to, do is decide what books, art or ideas are available to other young people. Such decisions should be made by trained educators, librarians and curriculum development professionals based on objective educational reasoning.

Public school administrators and other government officials (including school board members, principals and library boards) who allow the personal beliefs of a vocal minority to determine what students can read and teachers can teach not only violate the rights to freedom of expression and information of all community members, protected under the First Amendment, they endanger the well-being of the country’s most precious resource: its youth.

CO-SIGNED BY

National Coalition Against Censorship
American Association of University Professors
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Library Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors, First Amendment Committee
American United for Separation of Church and State
Association of American Publishers
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Authors Guild
Children’s Literature Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
Creative Coalition
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Freedom to Read Foundation
GLAAD
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health & Social Justice
GLSEN
Human Rights Campaign
Human Rights Watch
International Literacy Association
Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library
Lambda Legal
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Media Freedom Foundation & Project Censored
National Communication Association

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Unitarian Universalist Church
Washington Area Lawyers for the Arts
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SHORT TAKES

Library Censorship Legislation in Missouri and Tennessee Threatens Freedom To Read

Missouri House Bill 2044, known as the Parental Oversight of Public Libraries Act, calls for the creation of parental library review boards to identify and restrict materials they deem age-inappropriate for children. Tennessee lawmakers have proposed nearly identical legislation.

In addition to empowering unqualified individuals to overrule librarians' decisions and determine the books allowed on shelves, the bill proposes criminal prosecution for librarians who allow minors to access materials disallowed by the board and would deny funding to libraries that do not allow parental review boards to restrict access to their materials.

NCAC, the American Library Association, and other national groups strongly oppose these bills.

LGBTQ Books Challenged in Loudoun County, Virginia, School Libraries

The School Board of Loudoun County Public Schools is reviewing challenges to dozens of books added to classrooms by an initiative to diversify the district's classroom libraries. All of the books under review tell LGBTQ stories or feature LGBTQ characters. The challenged books range from titles for young children, like *Prince and Knight* and *My Princess Boy*, to young adult books in high schools, including *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*.

NCAC has called on Loudoun County Public Schools to remember the goals for its Diverse Classroom Library initiative: "To invest in celebrating its student population" by choosing books that "reflect and honor our student population and those around them."

The books continue to be reviewed title by title.

Michigan Teacher Denies Student Request to Write About Same Sex Marriage

A teacher at Hill McCloy High School told a student that she could not write about same-sex marriage for an assignment asking students to take a stand on an issue they care about. The teacher told the student that the topic could offend someone in class. When the student asked if she could ask her classmates if the topic offended them, the teacher admitted it was they who did not want to read about the topic. The student comes from a family with two married mothers.

While the school board allowed the student to change classes and stated that the teacher was wrong, NCAC has called for a public apology to the student and asked the district to reaffirm its commitment to free expression as a matter of policy.

SAN ANTONIO CENSORS QUEER CHICANA PERFORMANCE ARTIST



Still from *Spictacle II: La Tortillera* (2014) by Xandra Ibarra

In February, San Antonio's Department of Arts and Culture removed an artwork by Xandra Ibarra from an exhibition because of apparent discomfort with its unconventional representations of sexuality and the challenge it presents to gender stereotypes.

Created in 2014 from a live 2004 performance, Ibarra's work addresses race and gender stereotypes through the artist's performance as a minstrel Mexican housewife who takes on her "racial bondage to hot sauce, tacos, and demographic panic" in a humorous retro border corrido.

San Antonio's city attorney determined that the work violated a Texas statute barring "obscene content," despite the work not meeting the legal definition of obscenity upheld in *Miller v. California* (1973), which exempts material with "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." Ibarra is a well-recognized performance artist. On the opening day of the exhibition, Ibarra's video work "Spictacle II: La Tortillera" was removed upon orders from the city, despite the curators agreeing to curtain off the work with advisory signage.

In removing Ibarra's work, the City of San Antonio is likely violating the free speech rights of the artist, exposing the city to legal liability. NCAC has strongly urged Mayor Ron Nirenberg to restore the artwork to the exhibition immediately.

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A NEW TYPE OF ADVOCACY: FREE SPEECH IS FOR ME

The Project

NCAC has partnered with UK-based Index on Censorship, one of the world's leading freedom of expression groups, on Free Speech Is For Me, an initiative to equip a broad new range of advocates to challenge censorship, defend speech rights and champion freedom of expression for all activists.

Free speech has been critical to social movements throughout history. It has consistently been used as a powerful tool for marginalized groups to articulate their grievances and demand to be heard. But today, discussions surrounding "free speech" have unfortunately been dominated by a small number of people, leading many to question it as a value.

We know that when the principle of free speech is abandoned, those with the least access to power are hurt most. Free Speech Is For Me aims to show how freedom of expression furthers democracy and individual liberty and benefits everyone. If we allow free speech protections to be weakened, we lose our greatest tool in advocating for change.

This program aims to reclaim freedom of speech as a fundamental, universal human right by adding voices that are often missing from discussions surrounding freedom of expression. For the pilot program, six advocates from diverse backgrounds received training in speaking and writing about freedom of speech both within and outside of their own communities.

The advocates will be mentored by leading free speech experts. We will continue to support participants as they integrate free expression advocacy into their ongoing activism.

Meet the 2020 Advocates

Lillian Bustle is burlesque artist and advocate for sex workers' rights, the LGBTIA+ community and intersectional feminism.

Adeline Lee is at the forefront of campus free speech solutions that are anti-racist and support inclusivity and has worked with both PEN America's campus free speech initiative and the ACLU.

Mariana Molinelli is a human rights lawyer in Puerto Rico who works on protecting Puerto Ricans' too-often-challenged right to protest as US citizens.

Obden Mondésir is an oral historian and educator at the Weeksville Heritage Center, an important Black cultural center in Brooklyn, New York, who has seen firsthand how a culture of fear in dictatorial Haiti lead to self-censorship.

Maya Rubin is a student and fellow at the Freedom Project at Wellesley and a recent intern at Index on Censorship who taps into campus activist networks while promoting free expression.

Marjory Wentworth is a bestselling author, poet laureate of South Carolina, Pushcart Prize nominee and teacher of writing, social justice and banned books at The College of Charleston.

Want to learn more about the project or connect with an advocate? Send inquiries to ncac@ncac.org

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