

MEDIA FACTSHEET ON SCHOOL CENSORSHIP

Prepared in partnership by GLAAD and NCAC

The rise in efforts to ban specific topics from school libraries—largely books about LGBTQ people and race and racism—is inextricable from long-standing efforts by activist groups to increasingly use schools as a political battleground. Much of the media coverage of book bans has focused on specific titles being targeted, but in order to accurately tell the story of why these bans are occurring now, it is important to place them in context. The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom has tracked over 150 unique censorship incidents since June 1, 2021, a rate not seen in decades.

For several years, anti-LGBTQ groups have strategically targeted schools—and LGBTQ youth—in their policy and campaign efforts. From “bathroom bans” to school sports bans (both targeting transgender youth) and “Don’t Say Gay” laws that limit the free speech and inclusive lesson plans of teachers, schools are the centerpiece of the anti-LGBTQ agenda. Many of the same organizations are also involved in recent efforts to ban teachers from including concepts about racism in U.S. history in lesson plans as well. Those dual goals converged in 2021, as a wave of legislation sought to ban teachers from teaching certain concepts involving race, sex, and gender. Combined with a backlash to school mask and vaccination mandates, activists have swarmed school board meetings—and sometimes even threatened teachers, school board members, and librarians.

The citations below are designed to provide context for journalists covering the uptick in school censorship. It may be tempting to report on individual incidents as if they were the organic, grassroots reactions of impassioned parents—but this “astroturfing” is part of the strategy employed by the organized movement behind campaigns to censor teaching in schools. Regardless of approach, the removal of books from school libraries based on personal opposition to their content is illegal. In 1982, after the [Moral Majority](#)-inspired wave of book bannings, the Supreme Court [ruled](#) that a Long Island school district violated students’ constitutional rights under the First Amendment when it banned a selection of books. Notably, that case was brought by students; students are also resisting censorship in their schools today.

RECENT INCIDENTS:

Elected officials and organizations publishing lengthy target lists of books to oppose:

- Utah:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1g4eP3gAdrjB0beBbO_qCnxIJ3MzfQKyE6CQGpRJKZKq/edit?fbclid=IwAR2AS1ktWuJEcY-ljEdqQhGeNV6T05kaWi3vWSOxfNv5WtUS-DTs5VWVFO0
- Texas: <https://bookriot.com/texas-book-ban-list/>

State governors ask Depts of Ed to launch investigations:

- South Carolina:
<https://www.losangelesblade.com/2021/11/12/south-carolina-latest-to-join-ban-the-lgbtq-books-effort-by-republicans/>
- Texas: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/04/us/texas-lgbtq-books-schools/index.html>

Activists file police reports against school districts charging obscenity:

- Florida:
<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/os-ne-flagler-book-ban-debate-20211121-bqtlcu3zoveuvppuyrdyovuf54-story.html>
- Utah:
<https://www.ksaltlake.com/news/2021/11/22/utah-parents-united-targets-lgbtq-books-in-schools/>
- New Jersey: Claims of filed police reports (denied by police):
<https://www.mycentraljersey.com/story/news/education/2021/12/01/north-hunterdon-book-ban-controversy-enters-another-chapter/8785761002/>

Investigating students who check out certain titles:

<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2021/11/gop-candidate-wants-libraries-kids-check-lgbtq-books/>

Proposing bounties against teachers:

<https://twitter.com/Moms4LibertyNH/status/1459166253084467205>

Proposing criminal charges against teachers:

<https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2021/11/20/book-ban-debate-iowa-senator-calls-for-felony-penalty-obscene-materials-schools/8667630002/>

Efforts to recall school board members are surging around the country:

<https://www.axios.com/school-board-recalls-soar-critical-race-theory-86823daf-a7e1-4a55-965c-32f79b64954f.html>

https://ballotpedia.org/School_board_recalls

Threats of violence against school librarians, authors, school board members. While some incidents were triggered by school mask mandates, the issues of teaching race and LGBTQ topics often overlap at aggressive or violent school board meetings.

- FBI creates new “threat tag” to monitor cases
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/us/politics/fbi-school-threats.html?action=click&algo=bandit-all-surfaces&block=more_in_recirc&fallback=false&imp_id=328735692&impression_id=9d54d5e3-47b8-11ec-bdcc-0597972b4140&index=3&pgtype=Article&pool=more_in_pools%2Fpolitics®ion=footer&req_id=211111257&surface=eos-more-in&variant=0_bandit-all-surfaces
- Attorney General memo addressing threats against school staff:
<https://www.justice.gov/ag/page/file/1438986/download>
- Loudon County, VA school board member required police protection at her home after death threats related to her support of a transgender-inclusive student policy:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/death-threats-online-abuse-police-protection-school-board-members-face-dark-new-reality/2021/11/09/db007706-37fe-11ec-9bc4-86107e7b0ab1_story.html
- School board member in Brevard County, FL reported credible threats made against her and her family, including a false abuse claim filed against her to the Department of Children and Families:
<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/27/school-boards-covid-restrictions-violence-517326>
- Notoriously violent group Proud Boys enters school grounds in Oregon, triggering school lockdown:
<https://www.opb.org/article/2021/09/03/vancouver-schools-lockdown-anti-mask-protesters-entry/>

2022 LEGISLATION ALERT:

- Federal
<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/parents-bill-of-rights-underscores-furor-over-curriculum-and-transparency-in-schools/2021/11>
- Iowa
<https://www.axios.com/local/des-moines/2021/12/06/iowa-senate-jake-chapman-targets-books-schools>
- Party lines: GOP cites education and “parent’s rights” in response to race and LGBTQ curricula as top issues for 2022 legislation. This includes bills that seek to restrict teaching about racism as well as LGBTQ-inclusive curricula.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-03/gop-seizes-on-hot-button-school-issues-as-2022-election-weapons>

RELATED ISSUES:

The 2021 surge in efforts to censor books in school districts did not arise in a vacuum. Schools have increasingly become a political battleground, targeted especially by opponents of LGBTQ rights and racial justice. The [debate](#) over how to safely reopen schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increasingly aggressive pushback against school boards over mask and vaccine requirements and curriculum, including LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum and the history of slavery and racial inequity in the U.S.

Background on anti-LGBTQ efforts in schools:

- In 2016, legislation targeting transgender people’s access to restrooms and other sex-segregated facilities, HB 2, was passed in North Carolina. That spurred the Obama administration to issue trans-inclusive school guidance to protect students, and a wave of [‘bathroom bills’ swept state legislatures](#) in 2017—about half of which targeted school specifically.
- Throughout 2020-2021, ten states passed laws that effectively ban transgender youth from participating in school sports. This wave of legislation was the result of campaigning and legal efforts helmed by a handful of anti-LGBTQ organizations, including but not limited to the [Promise To America’s Children](#) coalition (helmed by Alliance Defending Freedom, Heritage Foundation, and Family Policy Alliance. The ‘Promise’ aims to [eradicate](#) transgender-inclusive school policies, LGBTQ-inclusive education, and other policies that currently or would in the future protect LGBTQ students from abusive parents, therapists, or other problems the coalition deems fundamental parental rights issues.
- Currently, 4 states (Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi) have [“Don’t Say Gay” laws](#) prohibiting teachers and school staff from addressing LGBTQ people or issues, and 3 more states (Arkansas, Tennessee, Montana) require parental notification (and opt-outs) before LGBTQ-inclusive curricula can be taught. Only 7 states require that school curricula be LGBTQ-inclusive.

- Before the pandemic in 2020, [a broad coalition issued a statement](#) condemning attacks on LGBTQ stories in schools and libraries after several years of increasing pressure for book removals and event cancellations.

Background on anti-racial justice and “CRT” efforts in schools:

- In 2021, nine states passed legislation banning the teaching of “critical race theory” in schools, and nearly 20 more states introduced similar legislation that did not pass, according to the [Brookings Institution](#). Many of these bills included bans on teaching about specific gender- and sex-related concepts, such as sexism and “sexual diversity” (code for LGBTQ). Many of the laws also include outright bans on diversity training for school staff.
- News coverage of the anti-CRT laws often leaves out the fact that among the 9 state laws passed banning teachers from teaching about racism in schools, [eight of the laws](#) *also* explicitly prohibit teachers from addressing certain concepts involving sex, gender, and LGBTQ people.

ACTIVISTS PUSHING FOR BOOK BANS: (an incomplete list)

Many state and local parent groups trying to ban books and lesson plans that are inclusive of LGBTQ issues and racial justice are connected to national groups that provide them with templates, model legislation, and toolkits for school-centered activism. For example, the [Associated Press](#) investigated local school board fights in Milwaukee, WI and found ties to some of the organizations listed below.

- [The Heritage Foundation](#)

The Heritage Foundation drafted [model legislation](#) for states to ban “critical race theory,” or accurate teachings about race, in schools. Along with its e-book about fighting CRT in schools, a legislative tracker, and more, its clear Heritage is deeply embedded in these efforts. Similarly, Heritage [links sex education to CRT](#) and has lobbied [against transgender rights](#) in schools and elsewhere. Its PAC, [Heritage Action for America](#), runs the anti-CRT campaign Save Our Schools, a campaign opposing the Equality Act, and campaigns that oppose healthcare coverage for transgender medical care, among other things.

- [Moms For Liberty](#)

The Florida-based Moms For Liberty, on its surface, appears to be a grassroots coalition of concerned mothers. In fact, is it a [heavily-funded organization](#) with strong ties to elected officials, the Florida Republican Party, the Heritage Foundation, and more. Founded in 2021 with chapters in a majority of U.S. states, Moms For Liberty chapters commonly instruct activists on how to oppose race, sex, and gender education in schools. For example, [Oregon Moms For Liberty](#)’s page describes critical race theory and state-mandated LGBTQ inclusion in sex education and lists contact information for elected officials, while the group’s Tennessee chapter has lobbied to ban [books about Martin Luther King Jr.](#), Ruby Bridges, and the civil rights movement from schools.

- Families For Educational Freedom

A project of the powerful, well-funded anti-LGBTQ group International Organization for the Family (also known as World Conference of Families, a [designated hate group](#) according to the Southern Poverty Law Center), [Families for Educational Freedom](#) encourages parents to submit “opt-out” letters to schools to recuse children from teachings about race, surveys that ask questions about gender identity and sexual orientation, and more. According to a [2015 HRC report](#), the parent group World Congress of Families was instrumental in Russia’s crackdown on LGBTQ citizens, including the passage of a 2013 law banning “LGBTQ propaganda.”

- No Left Turn in Education

No Left Turn and its founder, Elana Yaron Fishbein, frequently post incendiary rants on social media. In one, author Ibram X. Kendi is compared to Adolf Hitler, with the suggestion that “if your school district buys this guy’s books and invites him to speak, you better be raising hell.” In other posts, LGBTQ inclusion in schools is compared to “the dismantling of the family unit” and to pedophilia. Fishbein works closely with the Heritage Foundation and is a [signatory](#) on the anti-transgender Promise To America’s Children campaign that provided model legislation for anti-trans sports and healthcare bans in early 2021. (Source: [Media Matters For America](#))

- Parents Defending Education

Co-run by former Wall Street Journal investigative reporter Asra Nomani, [Parents Defending Education](#) uses “network and coalition building, investigative reporting, litigation, and engagement on local, state, and national policies” to fight what it calls liberal indoctrination in schools—code for curricula that includes teachings about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalized identity groups. The group’s [IndoctriNation Map](#) tracks schools that include racial justice and LGBTQ issues in policies, curricula, and events.

- State-Level Parent Groups: a few examples

— Utah Parents United “Laverna” campaign to rid schools of “sexually explicit” books
<https://www.utahparentsunited.org/laverna.html>

— Northland Parent Association has books pulled from Kansas City schools:
https://www.kmov.com/news/missouri-students-fight-back-against-parent-group-who-want-certain-books-banned/article_8d1ac91b-9974-5701-ac36-81971ec2e5ca.html

— Loudoun County, VA’s Fight For Schools: <https://fightforschools.com/media/>

- MassResistance

A Southern Poverty Law Center designated anti-LGBTQ hate group, [MassResistance](#) compares LGBTQ inclusion to facism and fights against sex education, LGBTQ inclusion in schools, Drag Queen Story Hour, transgender healthcare, and lately, LGBTQ books in libraries. The group recently took credit for shutting down a clinic for transgender youth in Texas, and has paid for billboards that call for an end to “child indoctrination at our library” in Wyoming among other campaign efforts. (Source: MassResistance website)

ORGANIZATIONS SPEAK OUT AGAINST BOOK BANS:

American Library Association Statement:

<https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2021/11/american-library-association-opposes-widespread-efforts-censor-books-us>

Joint statement from Tennessee Association of School Librarians (TASL), Tennessee Library Association (TLA), and Friends of the Tennessee Libraries (FoTL):

<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2021/10/21/tennessee-librarians-speak-out-against-chattanooga-school-board-members-attempt-have-books-banned-sc/6119874001/>

Texas librarians take over Twitter with #FReadom:

<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2021-11-18-librarians-fight-book-bans-with-twitter-takeover>

Parents and teachers resist bannings in Kansas City, MO:

<https://thebeacon.media/stories/2021/11/30/parents-push-for-banned-books/>

Over 175 Texas authors oppose Krause list:

<https://texasinstituteofletters.org/news/TIL-Response-2021-Political-Attacks-on-Books.pdf>

Maryland groups rally against book bans:

<https://www.washingtonblade.com/2021/12/06/howard-county-activists-and-allies-hit-back-at-censorship-hate/>

Michigan Civil Rights Commission passes resolution against censorship and book bans:

<https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2021/11/michigan-civil-rights-commission-says-critical-race-theory-ban-would-censor-teachers.html>

STUDENT VOICES AGAINST CENSORSHIP (a few examples):

Students are instrumental in combating book bans. For all of the language around “protecting children,” students’ voices are far too frequently forgotten in these debates. Given that many of the books at issue recently are optional library books, not part of the curriculum, hearing from the students who do seek out these titles about what these books have meant to them--and what is lost when they aren’t accessible--is crucial.

Kansas City students petition against book bans:

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/education/article255704801.html>

Students successfully overturn book ban in York County, PA:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/02/us/york-pennsylvania-school-books.html>

Students rally in North Hunterdon, NJ against bans:

<https://www.mycentraljersey.com/story/news/education/2021/12/01/north-hunterdon-book-ban-controversy-enters-another-chapter/8785761002/>

Spotsylvania, VA students petition to return banned books:

https://fredericksburg.com/news/local/spotsylvania-school-board-will-revisit-removal-of-sexually-explicit-library-books/article_3bff11ed-788a-5e60-b71f-f0a6c1670621.html

Media Contacts

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