

The Normalisation of Book Banning: The Rise of Book Censorship

In 2025, book censorship in the United States is rampant and common. Never before in the life of any living American have so many books been systematically removed from school libraries across the country. Never before have so many states passed laws or regulations to facilitate the banning of books, including bans on specific titles statewide. Never before have so many politicians sought to bully school leaders into censoring according to their ideological preferences, even threatening public funding to exact compliance. Never before has access to so many stories been stolen from so many children.

Two things help us make sense of the world – information and stories. Both explain, describe, and give language to the world we encounter. It is not a surprise then that banning books is a way of erasing stories, identities, experiences, and peoples and reshaping understandings of the past. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop warns: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.”

Stories tell us who we are and who we can become.

This right – the right to discover – is being taken from students under the guise of their “protection.” Over the past four years, a misleading campaign to “protect children” alongside advocacy for “parental rights” has been weaponized to diminish students’ First Amendment rights in schools, sow distrust in librarians and educators, and diminish the ability of authors and illustrators to connect with their intended audiences. In this upside down world, any rights of young people as students are somehow subservient to the absolute rights of their parents.

In 2022, we cautioned that book bans and related threats to free expression and the First Amendment should not be ignored; that this assault on students’ freedom to read is a slippery slope; and that state censorship of this nature, once unleashed, would snowball. Today, that escalation is no longer hypothetical. For many students, families, educators, librarians, and school districts, book banning is a new normal.

This change didn’t happen overnight, and it wasn’t a fluke of history. National and local groups touting extreme conservative views have played on parents’ fears and anxieties to exert ideological control over public education across the United States using consistent and coordinated tactics. These groups’ efforts have catalyzed censorial trends and a full-blown attack on public schools and democracy. This “Ed Scare,” as PEN America has termed it, has produced changes at the local, state – and increasingly, federal – levels at a frighteningly rapid pace, resulting in new policies that not only diminish students’ right to read and learn, but also take away protections for educators and librarians. Together, these trends are having a profound impact on the literary community and the country at large.

As a result of these groups and their political allies, book censorship in schools has reached a new apex, now becoming a routine and expected part of school operations, particularly in states like Florida, Texas, and Tennessee. And it is being anticipated on the horizon for educators and families in states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Minnesota. While we explore the specific trends that have led us to this escalated climate of censorship in this report, it is important to remember the big picture. These attacks on students’ rights and educational institutions are the symptoms of a much larger disease: the dismantling of public education and a backsliding democracy.

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Pen America – The Freedom to Write, 2026, pen.org, 2026

The Normalisation of Book Banning: Who and What is Being Targeted?

Persistent attacks conflate LGBTQ+ identities as “sexually explicit” and erase LGBTQ+ representation from schools. Efforts to ban children’s picture books especially illuminate the perniciousness of this attack. Nationally, there is evidence that extreme conservative groups have continued to circulate reports to schools with these claims, putting pressure – and providing cover – for district leaders to ban books on that basis.

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ books in classroom and school libraries was at the center of a United States Supreme Court case, *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, which was decided this summer. This case asked whether or not Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland must allow parental notifications and opt-out if lessons related to gender and sexuality might violate a family’s religious beliefs. The ruling in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, heightened censorship of LGBTQ+ content across school districts nationwide. Rather than offering histories, stories, and books that reflect all students and families, LGBTQ+ stories will be omitted from classrooms. LGBTQ+ students and their families will effectively be denied the freedom to read about themselves and those around them.

One trend has remained constant throughout these four years: Many of these book bans are not due to decisions made in reconsideration policies and processes. Nor are they the direct result of legislation. PEN America identified 2,520 book ban cases where the bans were influenced by pressure imposed from the presence or threat of state laws. Out of those, however, only 3% of the bans were triggered by a law requiring the removal of a book – the rest, 97%, came from bans caused by the fear that districts had of being out of compliance, regardless of whether the law was enjoined, hadn’t been passed yet, or didn’t call for the direct removal of books. This functions as a form of “obeying in advance” to anticipated restrictions from the state or administrative authorities, rooted in fear or simply a desire to avoid topics that might be deemed controversial.

Where there are everyday book bans, there is also everyday resistance. Often, it is parents, individual authors, students, educators, librarians, and community members who have been instrumental in creating the most local and direct pressure to return books to shelves. Other times, national organizations were publicly outspoken about district-level bans supporting these state and local efforts, such as National Coalition Against Censorship, Authors Against Book Bans, the ACLU, EveryLibrary, American Booksellers for Free Expression, the Author’s Guild, Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, and Military Families for Free Expression. Truly, no one fighting book censorship in schools is doing so alone, and many individuals, coalitions, and organizations are actively pushing back.

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The Normalisation of Book Banning: The Scale of the problem

During the 2024-2025 school year, PEN America recorded 6,870 instances of book bans across 23 states and 87 public school districts.

No title is safe as long as book banning efforts continue. This 2024-2025 school year, book bans affected 3,752 unique titles in 87 school districts nationwide. Some types of books are targeted for removal because of their content; but the climate of censorship that has spread in schools has impacted a wide array of titles written for all sorts of audiences. Access to literature prepares our youth to confront the real world, offering a window into experiences otherwise unknown to them. However, diverse ideas and stories featuring protagonists from historically marginalized identities are often the first topics targeted by censors.

The damage caused by book bans doesn't stop at the infringement of students' free speech rights and restrictions to the freedom to read. In their wake, book bans also leave a detrimental mark on thousands of creative people in the literary world. Throughout the 2024-2025 school year, book bans affected the works of almost 2,600 artists, including 2,308 authors, 243 illustrators and 38 translators.

The majority of the authors whose books are overwhelmingly targeted often explore themes with race and racism, gender identity and sexuality, or depict sexual violence in their work. During the 2024-2025 school year, the works of the ten most commonly banned authors account for 13% of all book ban instances.

Several of these authors have penned multiple titles – a phenomenon where a ban on one title from a specific author is followed by efforts to ban their entire collection. Book bans leave authors at increased financial risk due to a reduction in school visits or events, and the potential subsequent impact on their future book sales. Some authors have reported the emotional impacts of these book bans on their creativity, citing concerns about potential blowback to future works, which cause them to feel the need to self-censor. In this way, the book banning campaign has had an impact that ranges far beyond the specific titles and school districts, ultimately leaving many readers without access to current stories, and jeopardizing the stories yet to be imagined by these creators.

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The Normalisation of Book Banning: The Impact on Education

Over the last several years, censorship pressures have expanded and escalated, taking on different forms. State legislatures passed laws restricting educational materials and library books. State superintendents or departments of education issued directives to schools, causing confusion, and called out school leaders and librarians to remove educational materials. Elected leaders issued lists of books containing “explicit” material, demanding schools remove them. Groups made accusations of “porn in schools” to police and sheriffs departments, creating another form of pressure locally to ban certain titles. School districts have started issuing preemptive bans through “do not buy” lists, barring titles from ever entering their libraries. Administrators find it safer to remove a book in the face of pressure than fight for its belonging on library shelves, and educators and librarians admit to omitting books that may be objectionable.

From a birds’ eye view, school districts today are surrounded by multiple and persistent local, state, and now federal pressures to ban books, with diminishing reasons not to. The result is a kind of everyday banning – the normalization and routinization of censorship as an expected part of public education in many parts of the country. Book bans harm public school systems and restrict education. Book bans are the result of coordinated campaigns by individuals and groups, some of whom harbor homophobic, white supremacist, and Christian nationalist views. The onslaught of these campaigns upon public schools is an attack on the very purpose of public education – to educate all students, to generate empathy and understanding for an informed citizenry, and to serve as a great equalizer for students from all backgrounds.

Book bans are reported to decrease students’ engagement in reading, discourage their critical thinking, and interfere with a teacher’s ability to teach and strain systems that are already overwhelmed, as schools face teacher shortages, funding cuts, chronic absenteeism, and ongoing learning loss exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our public school system is foundational for free expression and for the rich exchange of information and ideas. School libraries are essential in supporting voluntary inquiry and have been defended as necessary places free from ideological control. And much like public libraries and other public institutions, the goal of public education is to serve everyone – equally and fairly. In sowing chaos across public education, the book banners and ideologues have laid bare their fear – namely, the fear of a more just, informed, and equitable populace.

These efforts to reject educational materials are illustrative of what ideological censors want to actually destroy: educational climates that allow access to critical historical narratives, the frontiers of contemporary science, and a diverse set of ideas that encourage students to learn to think critically. As PEN America has cautioned previously, the result of these efforts to police public education will inevitably narrow open inquiry and what young people learn about the world.”

The climate of bans is no longer new, but something that families, educators, and all of us have become conditioned to expect as part of the U.S. education system. Book challenges and bracing for parental criticism has become a routine while state laws, local policy shifts, federal policy changes, and continued attacks from conservative groups have placed extreme pressure on school district leaders. In many parts of the country, librarians, educators, and administrators now expect lists of challenges to “objectionable” titles as an inevitability. These titles, falsely deemed “harmful” or “inappropriate,” far too often target marginalized groups and groups historically under-represented in public school library collections. Eroding students’ right to receive information about their world, their histories and identities, and their own bodies, will inevitably allow a culture of censorship to fester, impoverishing students’ educational opportunities.