



Book Banning: Censorship in Action

The Threat

The practice of banning books in schools across the U.S. started in 2021, primarily in the rural counties of Republican controlled states, where small groups of parents sought to ban from school libraries books containing sexual content. Over the past two years, these efforts, according to PEN America, a free speech organization, burgeoned into a “full-fledged social and political movement, powered by local, state, and national groups.”¹

What is a Book Ban?

PEN America, defines a school book ban as follows:

...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 remove from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished.

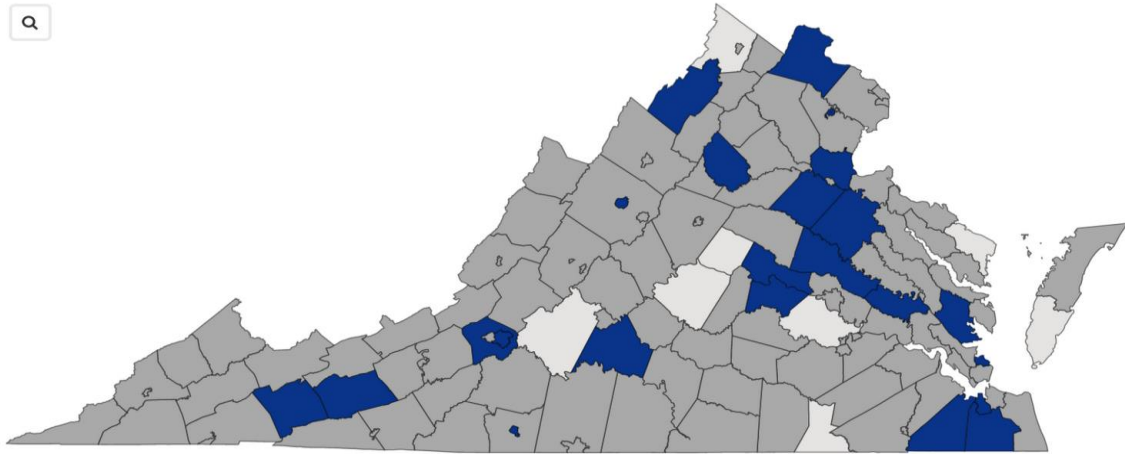
<https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>

Book banning poses a threat to our democracy in a number of ways. It prevents students from reading books that represent a variety of perspectives. It attacks the intellectual freedom of educators and librarians forced to work in “an increasingly punitive and surveillance-oriented environment.”² It censors authors whose work portrays characters of color and LGBTQ+ characters—authors whose themes include race and racism, marginalization of certain groups, and sexual experience.³ And it deprives parents of the opportunity to send their children to schools that promote diversity, curiosity, and the ability to read widely.⁴ Book banners offer a clear message: **Books that do not present a “straight, white, Christian and cisgender” perspective should be banned.**⁵

To date, 37 states have banned books, impacting millions of students. Frequently censored books include “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison, “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood, and “It” by Stephen King.⁶ During the first six months of the 2022-2023 school year, PEN American counted 1,477 instances of individual books banned. This is an increase of 28 percent over the previous six months.⁷ Virginia has not been immune to book banning; since 2021, 23 of the state’s 131 school districts have removed books from school libraries.⁸

School districts with at least one book taken off shelves for content reasons since beginning of 2020-21 school year

Yes
 No
 N/A



Data current as of April 30.

Map: Sean McGoey • Source: Public records requests sent to school systems

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Subject Matter of Banned Books

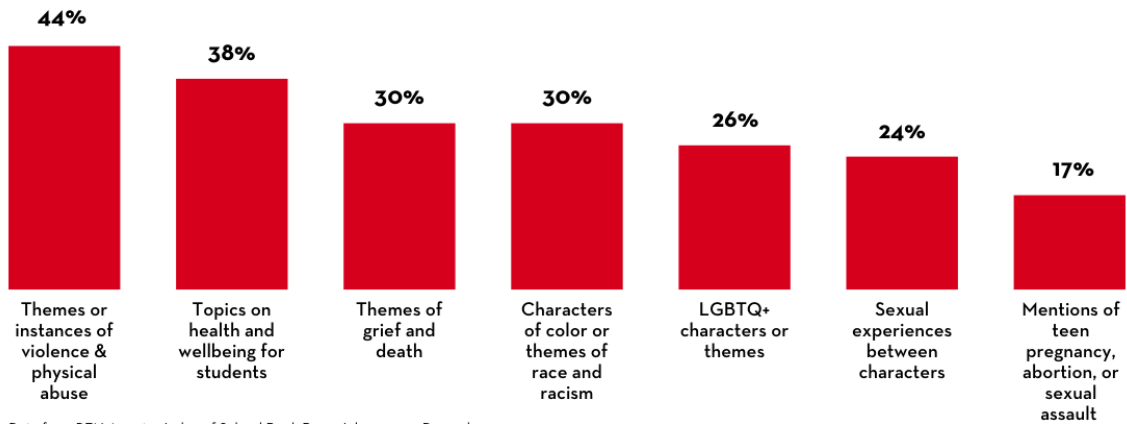
As mentioned above, many banned books are by and about marginalized people. The graph below indicates the subject matter of books banned from school libraries and classrooms.

Subject matter of banned content

of the 874 unique titles banned July 1, 2022 - December 1, 2022



Note: many titles contain more than one type of content.



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

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Book Banning Advocacy Groups

PEN America has identified at least 50 groups that advocate for book bans. These groups work nationally, at the state level, and in school districts. Many are ultra-conservative family-values and Christian organizations focused on reforming schools and including more religious education.

Tactics of Book Banning Groups include: ¹¹

- Sharing lists of books to challenge,
- Packing school board meetings,
- Demanding new rating systems for libraries,
- Using inflammatory language about “grooming” and “pornography,”
- Filing criminal complaints against school officials, teachers, and librarians,
- Controlling school district book purchases and digital library apps,
- Intimidating librarians, and
- Attempting to defund libraries.

Political Implications

According to Alex Keena, assistant professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University, over the past two years, book banning has become part of a Republican Party strategy "to focus on cultural wedge issues as a way to undermine the support of voters who might be on the fence about supporting Democratic candidates...."¹² As a result, state officials have increasingly been passing new laws and policies that include book banning.¹³

During the 2022-2023 school year, the greatest number of book bans have been implemented in Texas, Florida, Missouri, Utah, and South Carolina. But, according to the PEN America report, “the implications of [these] bans ... are far-reaching, as policies and practices are modeled and replicated across the country.”¹⁴

When Glen Youngkin was running for governor in 2021, he campaigned on the issue of parental rights.¹⁵ In April 2022, three months into his tenure as governor, he signed SB 656 into law. This bill ¹⁶ requires schools to inform parents in advance if books containing “sexually explicit” content would be used in the classroom. Parents would then have the right to opt out for their children.¹⁷

In response to the law, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) stated that while SB 656 does not explicitly list books that cannot be taught, it will likely result in increased censorship “due to teacher and librarian’s fear or confusion over what qualifies as ‘sexually explicit content.’”¹⁸

Anti-book Banning Statistics

The majority of voters across the country are strongly opposed to book banning. A national survey conducted by the American Library Association (ALA) in February 2022 showed that 71% of voters surveyed—including 75% of Democrats, 58% of Independents, and 70% of Republicans—opposed having books removed from their local public libraries. The survey also found that 74% of parents of public school students “express a high degree of confidence in school librarians to make good decisions about which books to make available to children.”¹⁹



JB 06/08/23

In an August 2022 Wall Street Journal-NORC survey, 56% of respondents disagreed with the statement: “If any parent objects to a book in the public school library, that book should be removed, even if other parents like the book.”²⁰ In March 2023, another survey found that 61% of respondents were more concerned that “some schools may ban books and censor topics that are educationally important” than by the prospect that instructional materials might offend students or parents.”²¹

Anti-book Banning Messaging

In its latest report on book banning, PEN America urges “policymakers, school boards, and district administrators [to] consider the many reasons for including and celebrating books rather than restricting them.”²² The following talking points provide cogent arguments against book banning.

- All students should have the freedom to read widely and have access to books by and about marginalized people.²³
- Book bans undermine students’ ability to develop the skills to participate fully in a complex multicultural world.²⁴
- While parents have the right to decide what their child can read, they do not have the right to decide what every child can read.²⁵
- School libraries should be able to offer a wide variety of books to all students and families, “regardless of personal or political ideologies and ideas.”²⁶
- Censorship suits brought against and by libraries have significant costs that waste public resources since damages can be significant.
- The Bible contains “incest, onanism, bestiality, prostitution, genital mutilation, fellatio, dildos, rape, and even infanticide.”²⁷

I would say the enemies of equality, the enemies of freedom, have always recognized that the first thing you attack when you want to strip people of their rights is the imagination, the ability to imagine those rights in the first place. And books are just an excellent, exceptional, maybe our best technology for conveying that.

From a Pen America Interview with National Book Award winner and MacArthur Fellow, Tanahisi Coates, whose book “Between the World and Me,” has been banned from many history classes.

<https://pen.org/ta-nehisi-coates-book-bans/>

Conclusion

Book bans have a negative effect on the autonomy of teachers and librarians and on the education of students. This is especially true for marginalized students who, as noted in the PEN America report, “deserve to see themselves in books, and ... [to have] access to a diversity of stories and perspectives in order to understand and navigate the world around them.”²⁸ They deserve an education that will help them “become informed citizens in an open, inclusive, and democratic society.”²⁹ School book bans undermine this outcome and, according to PEN America, they “are a canary in the coal mine for the future of American democracy, public education, and free expression. We should heed this warning.”³⁰



- 1 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- 2 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- 3 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/virginia-book-banning_n_63ee4464e4b0063ccb2b3b89
- 4 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- 5 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/virginia-book-banning_n_63ee4464e4b0063ccb2b3b89
- 6 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/virginia-book-banning_n_63ee4464e4b0063ccb2b3b89
- 7 <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>
- 8 https://richmond.com/news/local/education/23-va-school-districts-have-taken-books-off-shelves-in-past-two-years/article_7ce0f31d-dbab-55f0-9576-cb4ae93e14eb.html
- 9 https://richmond.com/news/local/education/which-public-school-systems-in-virginia-have-removed-books-from-circulation-after-challenges-from-constituents/html_0cd1d044-0ee5-5acb-a26d-d4e7c3536141.html
- 10 <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>
- 11 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- 12 <https://patch.com/virginia/fallschurch/banning-books-schools-becomes-rallying-cry-va-republicans>
- 13 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- 14 <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>
- 15 <https://patch.com/virginia/fallschurch/banning-books-schools-becomes-rallying-cry-va-republicans>
- 16 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/amid-book-bans-virginia-parents-push-authority-kids/story?id=89424117>
- 17 <https://www.newsweek.com/virginia-school-board-ban-books-stephen-king-margaret-attwood-1775323>
- 18 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/amid-book-bans-virginia-parents-push-authority-kids/story?id=89424117>
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- 20 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/05/book-bans-how-to-fight/>
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- 25 https://richmond.com/news/local/education/23-va-school-districts-have-taken-books-off-shelves-in-past-two-years/article_7ce0f31d-dbab-55f0-9576-cb4ae93e14eb.html
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- 27 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/05/book-bans-how-to-fight/>
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- 29 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- 30 <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>