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## Literature Speaks Louder Than Laws

### Introduction

“Books and ideas are the most effective weapons against intolerance and ignorance.”<sup>[1]</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson made this statement when he signed the bill amending the Library Services Act in 1964. It is still relevant today considering the ongoing climate of censorship in local public libraries and K-12 school districts around America. Banning books in schools and public libraries should not be allowed because it is a form of censorship that violates the First Amendment of the constitution. The removal and restricting of books primarily targets children’s literature, which will have a negative impact on the youth and future generations of our country.

In 2022, the American Library Association reported a record-breaking number of book ban attempts in over 20 years and nearly double the amount documented in 2021 (729)—not including the highly suspected number of challenges that went unreported. The Director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, Deborah Caldwell-Stone, claimed the bans originated from political organizations “whose goals include removing books addressing race, history, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health from America’s public libraries and school libraries that do not meet their approval.”<sup>[2]</sup> The restrictions being placed primarily target



children's literature because advocates fear that the content addressed in these literary works could have a potential negative influence on young readers.

### **Impact on Students**

Books containing material such as gender identity, sexuality, race, societal and cultural history, mental health, physical and sexual abuse, and politics expose students to various perspectives that have the undeniable ability to help students gain a greater understanding of themselves and our ever-changing society. Content in the 5,894 books banned over the course of the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years includes an overwhelming number of narratives written by or about people of color/race (37%), or members of the LGBTQ+ community (36%), about topics like violence or physical abuse (37%), and feature LGBTQ+ characters/themes (36%)<sup>[4]</sup>. Restricting and alienating these titles and their authors is not only discriminatory, it ostracizes students who belong to these communities and their experiences.

In a statement published by Teach for America, the director of the National Coalition Against Censorship, Nora Pelizzari says the role of a school library is to give each student unlimited access to books that represent them and to

“explore the diversity of the human experience from your town, from your school, from home in a sort of safe way. And denying students the opportunity to access those stories that can challenge them really threatens our entire education system, and it threatens students' abilities to be prepared to engage in a world full of people who are not like them.”<sup>[3]</sup>



Individuals with political authority are putting the safety of our country's students in danger by promoting the notion that it is acceptable to manipulate and silence views and experiences unlike their own. This will cause an unavoidable lack of empathy and social, emotional, cultural understanding in the youth and future generations that can—and will—have detrimental effects on our country.

### **Educators at Risk**

Although ban-supporters are motivated by the respective desire to protect students, restricting access to critical education and literature is a danger to students, educators, authors, and the world around them. Teachers and librarians across the U.S. are being threatened with severe punishment to abide by laws that infringe on students' rights to freely access and express educational/literary resources of their choice. States with legal punishments consist of Arkansas (school employees and public librarians can face prosecution, leading to up to six years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000); Indiana (school employees can face criminal prosecution leading to a possible \$10,000 fine or 2½ years of jail time); Oklahoma (school employees and public librarians can face up to \$20,000 in fines or 10 years in prison); Missouri (school staffers can be fined up to \$2,000 or imprisoned for a year); and Tennessee (school employees can face nearly a year in jail time and fees of up to \$2,500 and book publishers, distributors, and sellers found criminally liable for distribution could face up to six years in prison and a fine of up to \$103,000)<sup>[5]</sup>. Representative Jaron Crane (R) of Idaho co-sponsored a vetoed bill regarding the legal consequences of distributing obscene material to students and wrote a statement to The Post saying, "If teachers and librarians are scared to do their jobs, that confirms the fact that there is



indeed material in their libraries that is harmful to minors.”<sup>[5]</sup> However, the truth is that teachers and librarians are not scared to do their jobs because of “harmful” material in their libraries—they are scared to face possible repercussions for respecting students’ rights to receive information and ideas that go against vague, subjective legislation.

### **Censorship and the First Amendment**

This oppressive movement sweeping the country is currently the most common form of censorship; Defined as “the suppression of words, images, or ideas that are “offensive,” censorship by the government is unconstitutional on the grounds that it violates the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment.”<sup>[7]</sup>

“Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Although this statement provides Americans with protection of expression, there are still limitations. Courts must take two fundamentals into account when determining a case pressuring the First Amendment: content neutrality and whether the content has the ability to cause direct harm to the interest of society. In the case of content neutrality, the government is stopped from limiting content just because an individual or the masses find its content “offensive”. However, determining if themes or characters in literature could cause direct harm to students is completely dependent on personal judgment. All literary compositions are interpretational; and by political groups establishing educational limits upon students, these groups are taking advantage of their



ability to impose their individual, political, and moral views on vulnerable children. When the government or private individuals/groups censor students' education, students are taught that the basic rights they learn about in class do not apply to them. Unconstitutionally removing material that enables developing students to create their own identity and outlet for personal expression is unacceptable.

## **Conclusion**

Parallel to Lyndon B. Johnson's statement in 1964, the escalating literary censorship crisis in the United States poses a threat to books, ideas, and their creators. Book ban supporters are acting on their idea of targeting children's literature with diverse perspectives on health, gender identity, sexuality, race, and history to protect students from being exposed to content “that will harm their mental health and warp their development.”<sup>[5]</sup> As the advocacy for prejudiced legislation continues, the consequences of enabling discrimination, depriving students of critical education, and disturbing educators responsible for nurturing our youth will further develop until they become irreversible. It is vital to challenge these infringements in order to protect young readers, educators, and authors' right to explore diversity and individuality and ensure the preservation of books that resist intolerance and ignorance for generations to come.



Works Cited

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