

# 377 BOOK CHALLENGES TRACKED BY ALA IN 2019—AND THE PROBLEM IS GROWING

Book Banning and Its Adverse Effects on Students

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**A**cross the United States, an epidemic of sorts has struck. Both parents and politicians feel it's their duty to assert control over the information within school libraries. Parents especially feel that they should have access to and control over the books within school libraries. According to "Here Are the Books Parents Want to Ban in Schools Now," an article that appeared recently in *Vice News*,

In recent weeks, parents have complained to school boards in Missouri, Virginia, Texas, Florida, and other states about novels they consider to be obscene or inappropriate—most often, books that illuminate stories of marginalized identities. As a result, some districts have pulled books for review, while a handful of conservative politicians have seized upon the movement as a rallying cry to their side. In a few instances, parents or school board members have also tried to elevate their concerns to law enforcement. (Ockerman 2021)

This act, book banning, has affected no one more than students and school librarians. Students find that the people who are supposed to advocate for them, parents and guardians, are often working against them. Two issues stand out. One of these issues is student voice and representation—or, rather, the lack thereof. The other is how book banning can affect students' lives, not only on an educational and informational level but on a deeper, more-personal level.

### Students' Voices

Students are often the reason for book banning, although they are not the direct cause. Parents

want the best for their children. Toward that end, parents are often concerned about ideas their children are exposed to and keep certain types of information locked away until the parents think the child is mature enough to handle it. However, many parents believe that their child shouldn't be the only one following their standards, and try to impose their restrictions on all children. This belief leads to the situation in which many school libraries now find themselves: forced to defend learners' access to diverse ideas and perspectives. However, what is even more important is the impact on students in this situation. At first

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glance, students may seem to be represented, as a parent appears to be speaking on behalf of a student. However, in many instances of book challenges, this is a misrepresentation. The student's voice may not be heard, as the parents have assumed control of it.

Students certainly do have opinions on banning of books, even though their voices may be stifled by parents claiming to advocate on behalf of students. However, even though parents try to speak for their children, students have banded together to speak up and combat book banning due to how

it affects them. For example, *Pico v. Island Trees Union Free School District Board of Education* began in 1976 when a group of students sued their school district for a violation of First Amendment rights after the school removed books from the library shelves. After the case had been dismissed by a local court, Steven Pico and others appealed the decision. Ultimately, in 1982 the Supreme Court decided 5–4 in favor of Pico (Brannen, Hanes, and Valentine 2011).

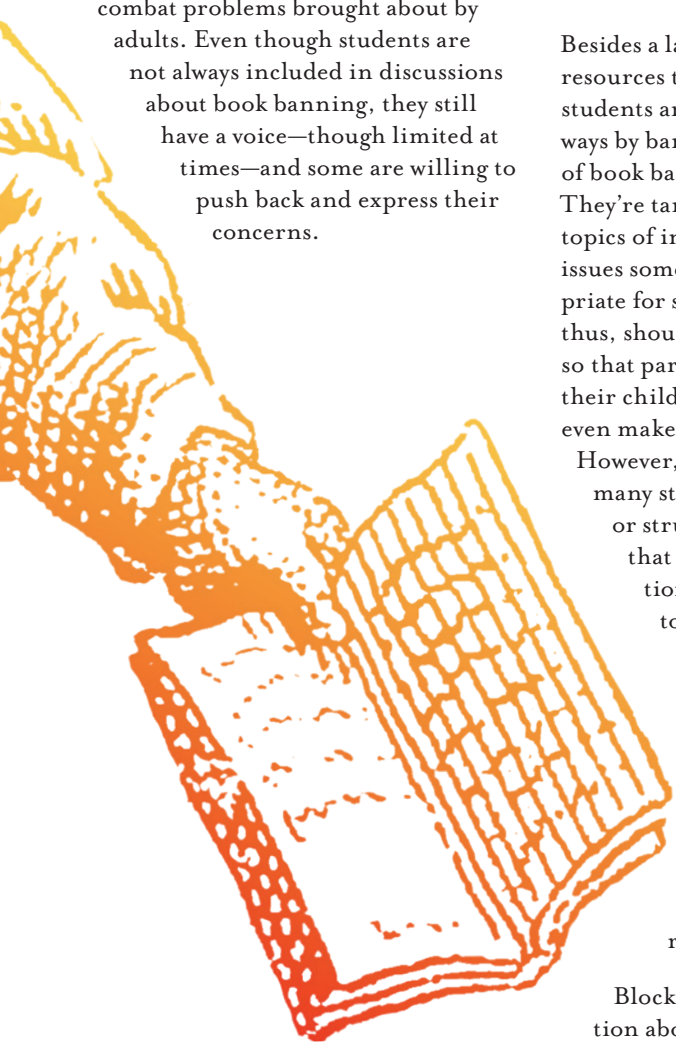
In a more-recent case, after a school district in York County, Pennsylvania, disallowed teachers from using a select group of books within their lessons, a group of students banded together to overturn the ban. According to an article published in *The Guardian*, "US Conservative Parents Push for Book Bans – and Unintentionally Make Reading Cool Again,"

Today, the confluence of students and teachers who overturned the ban are known as the Panthers Anti-Racist Union, named after the mascot of Central York High School. The group aims to continue their social justice advocacy into the future, which could soon result in much bolder action than the mealy proclivities of the local school board. (Winkie 2021)

Another recent case of students pushing back against banning was in Kansas City, Missouri, where a group of parents affiliated with the organizations No Left Turn in Education and Northland Parent Association pressured schools in the Kansas City area to ban a selection of books, claiming that the books (such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison) were sexually explicit and didn't belong in a public school. The tipping point came, however, when the Northern Kansas City district removed memoirs *Fun Home* by Alison

Bechdel and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson from its high school libraries. In response, two students in the district circulated a petition that led to the school board returning the two books to the shelves, setting up a process for parents to limit only their own children's access to titles, and expressing willingness to review selection and reconsideration policies. To emphasize the importance of diverse titles in the school library, the students who drafted the petition followed up by speaking, along with other students, at a school board meeting after the books had been restored to the library (Ujiyediin 2021).

Students rose to the occasion to combat problems brought about by adults. Even though students are not always included in discussions about book banning, they still have a voice—though limited at times—and some are willing to push back and express their concerns.



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### **Book Banning's Impact on Individuals**

Besides a lack of say about what resources they can access in school, students are affected in other adverse ways by banning books. Instances of book banning aren't random. They're targeted at specific ideas or topics of information. These are issues some adults feel are inappropriate for students to read about and, thus, should be purged from schools so that parents can either educate their child on the issues or not even make students aware of them.

However, these issues are often ones many students either experience or struggle with, and topics that students need information about. Resources about topics such as racial hatred and discrimination, sexual orientation and gender identity, substance abuse, alcoholism, mental health, and many more have been targets of adults who want to restrict students' access to books and other resources.

Blocking access to information about reality can have a range of negative effects for students.

One is that students are robbed of materials that could relate to their own lives at a time when many feel that no one else has gone through the things they have. An article written by a ninth-grader and published by the African Leadership Group states:

Why would we rob them of the opportunity to learn more about themselves, to see life as it is in a different light? School libraries should not be allowed to ban certain books because banning a book is like banning an opportunity. Why would you want to miss out on an opportunity that could change your life? (Dia 2021)

For those who don't experience certain issues or have the same perspectives as those who do, access to diverse books is a crucial element in learning more about issues other people face in our society. For example, suppose a white student in a predominantly white community wants to learn more about racial issues and injustice. Access to diverse books in the school library would give the student the perfect opportunity to explore and learn more about the subject. However, if a local controversy led to books' removal, that student might be unable to find a quality book about the topic. How can people expect school to be a place for learning and growth, but at the same time push for restricting material and inhibiting students from educating themselves on timely topics?

For students who are personally affected by the issues presented in books that some people want to ban, the situation is even worse. Not only are these young people and their classmates restricted from access to diverse information and perspectives, but these affected students have to sit and watch as parents object to material exemplifying the

students' own experiences. Unfortunately, as I write this early in 2022, a bill advancing through the Florida state legislature could have wide negative impacts on students. If the bill becomes law in its current form:

A school district may not encourage classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students. (Florida House of Representatives 2022)

The bill also would give parents the right to take legal action against schools that violate the law. I think Chasten Buttigieg tweeted it best, "This will kill kids...You are purposefully making your state a harder place for LGBTQ+ kids to survive" (Yang 2022). This situation is, quite frankly, abhorrent. Will including resources in the school library be considered "encouraging" discussion that some people will consider inappropriate for some students, blocking access for all students?

As with the example of the white student who wanted to learn more about racial issues, students who want to learn about perspectives of and issues that affect LGBTQ+ people may be unable to access books that would provide these insights. Even worse, think about a student I'll call "Dahlia." Dahlia is a closeted trans girl (meaning that she isn't openly expressing her transgender identity to most around her). Not being able to find many people to relate to, she seeks refuge in books that reflect how she feels. If those books become banned books, she no longer has refuge. Adults, the people who should be there to help and inform, are now fighting about whether her gender identity should be allowed to be discussed or even mentioned in an environment she encounters daily. The books containing the per-

spectives and experiences that she hasn't been allowed to have yet would be gone, removed from the shelves. Thousands of other students are in the same situation as Dahlia, lacking a voice, as parents and politicians threaten to restrict the information that not only informs others, but helps young people understand themselves.

The whole idea of book banning is, in itself, a tragedy—especially in school libraries. In a society that preaches acceptance and equality, it's hypocritical that in some places people also want to restrict students from learning about issues that affect not only them, but others in their lives as well. Burdened with an issue that they are told is for their own good, many students find themselves adversely affected by this censorship. As book banning targets certain topics and ideas, many students personally affected by the topic are at a loss about what to do. Lacking a voice—or stifled when they try to exercise it—they can only sit by as books and information reflecting their experiences and struggles are pulled from shelves, leaving access to no student. While some students are finding their voice and protesting for change, book banning is an issue they shouldn't have to fight against in the first place.

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