

DEFEATING THE CENSOR WITHIN:

How to Hold Your Stand for
Youth Access to Literature in
the Face of School Book Bans

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What do school librarians need to know about the book challenges and bans sweeping across the country? How do you keep the focus on students and their needs when heavily organized right-wing groups put targets on the books in your collection?

If these questions spike your anxiety or you feel that this isn't what you signed up for, I understand. As a former high school English teacher and a current YA author and literature professor, I never expected to be at the center of public controversy, much less book banning. My historical novel *Out of Darkness* was published in 2015 and the recipient of multiple awards, including being named a Michael L. Printz Honor Book by ALA. The book was not challenged or the cause for complaint anywhere, ever, until 2021. Since then, *Out of Darkness* has become one of the books most often targeted by book banners. Although I've always been an advocate for literacy, now I find myself having to fight for students' physical access to books.

But the threat posed by these book banning efforts is not just the removal of specific books like *Out of Darkness*. It's the broader chilling effect in schools, the silent ripple of "soft" censorship or self-censorship by students, teachers, librarians. More pernicious than public book bans, soft censorship has many subtle expressions. An

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administrator suggests that a school librarian relocate controversial books behind the counter or in the back. Books representing certain communities, or with certain themes, or included on certain lists suddenly become the focus of collection "weeding." A teacher rewrites their spring novel study unit to remove a text by a recently challenged author even though students in the past have responded well to the book and succeeded in accomplishing curricular goals. Targeted books are checked out and never returned to the school library; once "lost," they are not replaced. A librarian opts not to order an LGBTQ-friendly relationship book and an up-to-date puberty guide, although the materials are highly recommended by professional journals and relevant to some students in the school.

Free speech and anti-censorship organizations like PEN America, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), and the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) at ALA, as well as journalists, have documented that public bans, quiet removals, and other forms of censorship are rampant in U.S. libraries, but we can't let it go unchecked. I offer my perspective on the issues in hopes that it inspires you to steel yourself—and your colleagues—against this harmful effort to undermine education and free inquiry. In addition to the steps below, please report *any pressure* to remove particular content from your school library to the NCAC and ALA's OIF. Students are counting on you.

Be ready to protect the rights and needs of EVERY student you serve, not just the majority.

Unfortunately, 2021 saw an unprecedented number of book challenges, removals, and bans across hundreds of school districts all over the country, and that harmful trend has

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continued in 2022. In the overwhelming number of cases, these attacks target books by or about people with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or other marginalized identities. You may not yet be seeing local attacks on young people's access to diverse literature, but your resolve and preparation *now* can make a difference if—or when—challenges come to your community. And your voice and advocacy can be part of the collective response we need to shift focus from the shouting of a few misguided adults to our obligation to serve *all* learners, including those whose values, needs, experiences, and identities are marginalized.

Recognize the new tactics in book banning.

A handful of recent challenges have followed the old model of a single parent targeting a single book, but most reflect a new, far more coordinated strategy. Well-funded "parents' rights" groups—some of which formed around anti-masking activism—have pivoted to a focus on curriculum and books. Objections to the honest and complete teaching of history intertwine with vague claims about pornography. These groups often use misleading terms like "pornographic," "inappropriate," "controversial," and "divisive" to describe books by or about non-white or non-dominant people, and/or that address experiences such as sexual assault or police brutality.

Remember, to the banners and the groups behind them, it's not *really* about the books.

Although individual parents may believe the rhetoric and actions are about reading materials and parenting, right-wing politicians have embraced attacking books as a two-for-one issue: mobilize their base *and* undermine public education. Texas State Representative Matt Krause published a list of 850 books he claimed should be investigated by school officials. (Here is a link to the list, with analysis that reveals the political motivations behind this haphazard compilation of keyword searches using “trigger” words like “LGBTQ” and “racism”: <https://bookriot.com/texas-book-ban-list/>.) Parental control over reading material became pivotal in the Virginia governor's race, and state legislatures have taken up bills to criminalize the fulfillment of high school teachers' and librarians' normal duties.

Attacks on school library materials vary in scope from one book in the case of the South Carolina governor's letter mischaracterizing the memoir *Gender Queer* (to learn more, go to www.wistv.com/2021/11/19/superintendent-spearman-responds-gov-mcmasters-letter-about-controversial-book-school-library) to the 850 books targeted by Matt Krause's list. Coverage of these bad-faith actions in conservative media outlets have too often presented them as credible, reinforcing suspicions and resentments already being stoked by anti-Critical Race Theory efforts and cultivating the false impression that vaults of pornography exist in school libraries.

Know how attacks on books hurt students.

The recent attacks on diverse, relevant, complex literature in schools are, at bottom, a proxy war on students who share the mar-

ginalized identities represented in the challenged books. These proxy wars cause collateral damage. The casualties are our kids.

I see three immediate harms. First, when adults attack books that center people with LGBTQ+ or non-white or non-dominant identities, they broadcast the message that stories about “these people” are not fit for school, impoverishing the range of representations available to young people. Second, these attacks on diverse books imply that LGBTQ+ or non-white or non-dominant students' very presence in schools is controversial—just like the presence of the books branded as unfit for school libraries. Now, these two harms occur the minute parents begin publicly maligning the books in question. But a third harm is still more concerning, both because it is preventable and because it lends these attacks an unearned appearance of legitimacy.

The third harm occurs when school boards disregard their own content review policies and remove books on the sole basis of parent complaints. This wrongly elevates the questionable judgment and biases of a handful of people over the training of librarians as well as the policies and procedures put in place to ensure school library services do, in fact, serve all learners. When the targeted books are overwhelmingly about non-white, non-dominant experiences, this action essentially endorses the disenfranchisement of already marginalized people, creating an environment that is hostile to the students whom school boards ought to be serving. School boards

engaging in this kind of capitulation have lost their priorities—and their bearings. This is especially evident when, as in the case of removals of my book in Lake Travis ISD and Keller ISD, the book challenges and complaints are not even being brought by people who have students in the schools where the books are held.

Anticipate hostile, dramatic behavior.

Parents participating in the agenda of right-wing groups often attempt to circumvent review policies through attention-grabbing antics in school board meetings. These include dramatic and decontextualized readings of passages from the books under attack, extreme accusations such as that YA authors and librarians are pedophiles and “groomers” who are peddling pornography to minors. In Leander, Texas, a parent gave her public comment about *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado while brandishing a pink dildo. A woman in Lake Travis, Texas, targeted my novel *Out of Darkness* in an unhinged rant about anal sex—a rant that then went internationally viral, contributing in large part to the pervasiveness of attacks on my novel. (See my response video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4dNu4UA-As.)

This level of sensationalism might seem absurd, but it's important to know that, in too many communities, *it is having its intended effect*. In both districts mentioned above, the attacks succeeded in getting books removed. Often, this occurs without any review

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process being completed, in violation of district protocols and procedures.

It can be hard to know how to handle extreme behavior. If it comes your way, calmly acknowledge that parental concerns are valid and share resources with the parent about any options for addressing what their child or teen is reading. Neutral, non-reactive, non-defensive responses (even if repeated almost verbatim) avoid feeding energy into the attack. As soon as you can, reach out to trusted colleagues for support, and seek guidance from relevant local, state, and/or national professional organizations and library associations.

Gain strategy from those taking action and cultivate new allies.

Don't wait until you're up to your nose in a challenge to reach out; begin building partnerships now. For example, EveryLibrary is a nonprofit group that offers pro bono practical political, strategic, and tactical consulting for librarians and citizen's groups <www.everylibrary.org>. There is also the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF), a non-profit legal and educational organization affiliated with the American Library Association <ftrf.org>. The FTRF protects and defends the First Amendment to the Constitution and supports the right of libraries to collect - and individuals to access - information. Here are some other excellent resources:

- Accounts like @FReadomFighters and #freadom on Twitter provide examples of *positive* messages about targeted books and access to relevant reading materials
- Tips from @ncacensorship for defending LGBTQ+ texts (can be adapted to respond to other attacks): <<https://bit.ly/ncacigtbtq>>
- An NCAC resource to help educators and their allies respond to book challenges and preserve an environment in which ideas are exchanged freely: <<https://bit.ly/ncacedu>>
- BookRiot.com guide to fighting bans and censorship: <<https://bit.ly/fightbans>>
- PEN America Tip Sheet for Students on Fighting Book Bans: <<https://bit.ly/bantips>>

Once you get your footing and build a stronger set of core explanations, try to reach as far into the "middle" of your community as you can. That is, in addition to talking to the people you can count on to be passionate about youth access to literature, also engage those who may not initially be fired up about responding to censorship but who genuinely care about kids and education. Help these folks see what is being *taken away* from learners. Even if they don't think their kid needs a certain book, the issue may become real to them if you can capture what that challenged book

means to some students—and what not having it might mean. It takes twenty supportive, grateful voices to match the volume of one hostile, uninformed voice.

Inform yourself and others about policy, legal precedent, and principles of librarianship.

Now is the time to ensure you know the process for content challenge or review in your district. Identify any guidelines for collection building or materials selection as well. You may want to establish the practice of making a note for any books acquired regarding how they serve students within your school community. (Emphasize that a book does not need to serve *every* student to be an essential part of a collection.) In addition to strategies mentioned elsewhere in this issue, if you know a book has been or will be challenged, consider supplementing policy information with context and alternatives to book removals.

- **Context for the targeted literature:** Consider offering comparisons between content in the targeted work(s) and "classics" (e.g., parent objects to depiction of rape, note a comparable scene in Bible, Shakespeare, etc.). You may also note how long the book has been on shelves, reviews, etc. as well as comparable books featuring white, straight characters (although we don't want to throw more cannon fodder to the book banners).

- **Information on groups pushing book challenges:** Ensure that leaders are aware of the influence of groups like No Left Turn in Education, Moms for Liberty, and any state or local groups with political ties. This may help school leaders understand that these are not spontaneous parent concerns. It can be revealing to show leaders the online book lists from which these challenges often spring—as well as how similar they are to lists originally intended to help diversify collections. What the targeted books have in common is not explicit content; it's engagement with experiences

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of minoritized communities and tough topics like racism and sexual assault.

- **Alternatives to book removals:** Suggest ways of *responding* to parent concern or creating opportunities for dialogue without restricting access to materials that are important to other students. For example, a district might host a “How to Talk to Your Teen about Books” discussion. For language that may especially appeal to “concerned” parents focused on “content” issues, see the chapter “Parents’ Guide to Talking about Difficult Topics” in this guide created by the Utah Library Association: <<https://ula.org/guide>>. This is a great example of how to frame issues of access in terms that won’t alienate parents who haven’t yet been won over to the cause.

Librarians can most-effectively fight back against banning efforts when school boards receive relevant information early in the process. Often school boards head down a path of removal before they understand the limits on their actions—and the potential harms to students. An emphasis on the challenged books’ value can be an especially important part of educating stakeholders. Folks with reservations about a book when all they know about is the “concerning” content may support student access to diverse books once they have a broader picture of the situation and of what the text means to young people.

Show up at your school board meeting and make public comment in support of youth access to diverse books. Read a short, powerful passage from a challenged book. Highlight a positive message. Let kids know that they have a right to speak, too. One parent I talked to described the strategy of having a few parents

sign up to speak in support of a specific topic; then others who came in solidarity with that position (plus the speakers) all wore the same color T-shirt. This strategy makes the fact of broader support more obvious.

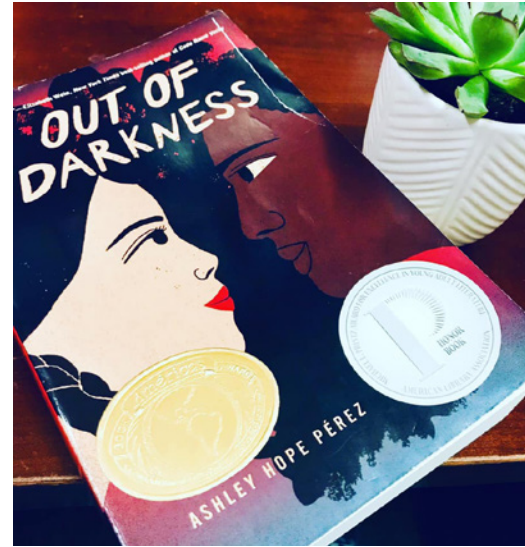
Amplify student voices.

In my experience, the single most-powerful challenge to book bans comes from those that schools are charged with serving. Ask young people in the community who have read a challenged work to comment on what it meant to them and why they want friends and classmates to be able to read it. Parents and youth allies can help students prepare comments for school board meetings. Youth activism had an impressive impact in North Kansas City Schools, where students gave powerful testimony during the district school board meeting. (For inspiration, watch these amazing young people speak truth to power, starting at 28:15: <www.youtube.com/embed/I8hGg2IVHNI>.) Students have also created banned book clubs, petitions, demonstrations, and read-ins to protest the removal of literature and resources from their libraries.

Go the extra mile for targeted books and targeted kids in whatever ways you can.

A lot of what I’ve described above is preemptive; still, you can also go out of your way to highlight targeted books in your library so that they *do* find their readers. Consider doing the most that you can while not incurring excessive professional risk. Librarians in communities where parent groups and politicians have created controversy may have to adopt more-subtle methods, but here are some ideas for highlighting the books:

- **Go big:** Make huge posters with many banned or challenged titles to show what would be missing from their library if book banners



succeeded. Offer space for readers to express, with sticky notes or scribble pages, what they value in those books.

- **Go clever:** If a book has already been removed, print the cover of the banned book and wrap it around a piece of foam or something to make a placeholder for the book where it *should* be on the shelf. A message could go on or in the “book” to inform kids about where or how they could find and read the book.
- **Go small:** Create a sense of curiosity or mystique. Make jars or small displays with miniature versions of the books that have been banned or are under attack. You can add a message such as, “Ask me about these books,” or even have a mini-zine or booklet attached to explain where kids *can* get the books.
- **Go subtle:** If that feels too risky, a simple decoration or poster can feature the removed books with no other words attached. Then, if students ask about it, you can tell them what the books have in common and answer questions about how they might access them.
- **Go public:** Partner with your public libraries and bookstores to prominently display books that are being targeted, especially any that

have been removed from the school libraries. Could extra copies be purchased? What about displays to help readers find what has gone missing from their schools?

Keep reconnecting to what you stand for.

As an author dealing with bans, I struggle to maintain my resolve; I can only imagine how difficult it is for teachers, librarians, and students. But here is a final—and perhaps most important—strategy.

Even as we fight *against* attacks on youth access to books, we can find strength by articulating, to ourselves and to others, what we stand *for*. In fact, we must state what we are *for*, because we can’t hold a stand that we haven’t defined for ourselves. Once we name our values, explicitly, we can resist the censors—without and within—and keep our actions aligned with our mission. For example:

My stand is for EVERY student’s right to read.

My stand is for books that turn kids into readers.

My stand is for telling the stories that haven’t been told.

Post your stand in multiple places where you will see it. Announce it

to students and colleagues. Repeat it internally when you are in hostile or unsupportive spaces. If you advocate from a grounded place, every action will be more impactful. And since this struggle isn’t going away, we need to conserve energy and renew our inner resources in every way we can.



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including *Out of Darkness* (2015), which has recently been banned and challenged in school districts across the country. *Out of Darkness* was described by The New York Times Book Review as a “layered tale of color lines, love and struggle in an East Texas oil town,” and received a 2016 Michael L. Printz Honor Award, the 2016 Tomás Rivera Book Award, and the 2016 Américas Award. *Out of Darkness* was selected as a best book of the year by both Kirkus Reviews and School Library Journal, and Booklist named it one of “50 Best YA Books of All Time.” Follow Ashley on Twitter or Instagram: @ashleyhopeperéz. Learn more about efforts to challenge book banning: <<https://linktr.ee/ashleyhopeperéz>>.