

# THE CENSORSHIP STORM IS UPON US: PREPARE, RESPOND, REPORT



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**Abstract:** Teachers want their students to have access to the books they need to fall in love with reading, which means having classroom and school libraries stocked with a wide variety of books. But as English teachers are well aware, Texas leads the nation in book challenges and bans. This article defines and describes the different forms of censorship and includes extensive information and resources to support classroom teachers as they prepare for and respond to book challenges, including building allies and staying in tune with organizations that provide support. The authors conclude by describing how book challenges are the current reality and that we must work toward and remain hopeful for a future in which diverse classroom libraries abound.

**Keywords:** censorship, text selection, English language arts, reading instruction, advocacy

Texas leads the nation in calls to remove books from classrooms, school libraries, and community libraries. An “intransigent minority” (Taleb, 2018, p. 69) of voices are saying that *no student should have access to this book* and then teachers, administrators, school boards, school districts, and libraries have to stop all that they’re doing—teaching, managing, and administering—to respond. The Texas Legislative sessions in 2021 and 2023 directly and indirectly turned books into weapons of the culture wars.

It is in this atmosphere that teachers spend their own time and money purchasing books that they believe would be of interest to their students. Teachers work hard to know their students, ensuring that well-chosen books for their students provide “windows” to other lifeworlds as well as “mirrors” to one’s own (Bishop, 1990). The former is what helps to build friendship and affiliation between young people from various backgrounds and the latter holds the power of representation or students’ seeing themselves represented accurately and respectfully in books. In making these choices to include diverse books in their classrooms, though, teachers also know they will face book challenges themselves.

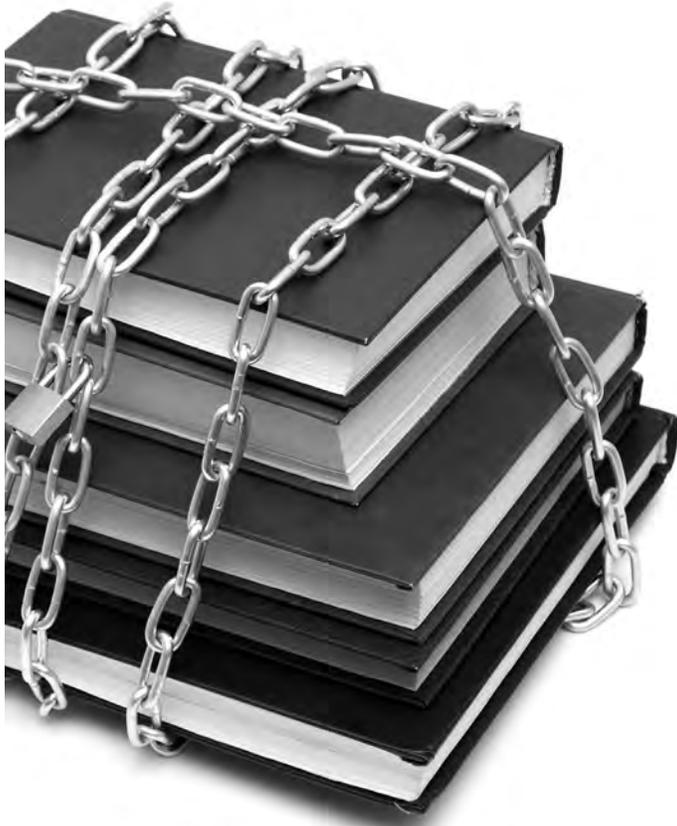
## Facing the Storm

In Texas, many families are familiar with natural disasters, be it fires, tornadoes, floods, or hurricanes. We know how to be prepared, and we know how to respond. Most of us know to store plywood to board up windows for hurricanes or know the location of important documents in case of a flood evacuation. In this article, we offer resources for teachers during a time in which censorship is widespread across the state. Like natural disasters, we want teachers to be able to prepare for, respond to, and report censorship.

First, we offer suggestions for how to prepare for a book challenge, which includes identifying policies, gathering allies, and designing robust, standards-aligned curriculum.

Second, we offer succinct suggestions on how to respond to a book challenge. Bearing in mind that efforts to censor can take many forms, we offer a few possible responses to individuals, to groups, and to outside entities. All disasters require a response, but how you respond differs based on the nature, scope, and imminent threat level of the disaster. We offer some broad guidelines for whether you should be storing supplies in waterproof tubs or sheltering in the basement.

Third, we outline how to report censorship to organizations tracking and responding to challenges and censorship. Just like individual tornado chasers and hurricane watchers are essential to the



National Weather Service, individuals reporting censorship help the organizations tracking and advocating for intellectual freedom to see the trends in local communities, all around the country. Support for those advocating for diverse books can then be offered to those local communities and individual teachers.

### What Is Censorship?

One of the foundations of a democratic society is the individual's right to read, and also the individual's right to freely choose what they would like to read. ... This right is based on an assumption that the educated possess judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of their own actions. (Chang et al., 2018)

In discussing an issue like censorship, it is valuable to have working definitions of the different kinds of censorship as each requires different responses. The two forms of censorship this article addresses include direct censorship and red-flagging. NCTE has policy statements on "The Students' Right to Read" (referenced at the beginning of this section) and "Against Red-Flagging" (Oltman et al., 2018) that address these kinds of censorship and make clear why students need access to a diverse range of books, carefully selected by teachers. Links for the statements are available at the end of the article.

**Direct censorship** is when a school or district employee or elected official restricts students' access to a text. This could mean a principal requiring teachers to remove books from their classroom libraries or a school board passing a policy allowing the board to vet all books purchased for any school.

Next is **red-flagging**, which is rating books for controversial content and often placing them in a "special location" or somehow marking them not available for widespread student use. When a teacher has

to keep books with LGBTQ+ content in a drawer in the school desk instead of on the classroom library shelves, that is one example of red-flagging.

Two more notes about censorship are worth addressing but will not be covered extensively in this article. First, individual parents always have the right to have their children opt out of reading particular books. In Texas, this right is part of the Texas Education Code, Section 26.010. Historically and currently, teachers have been offering and will continue to offer alternative texts should families request it. Planning for those texts is part of preparing.

Second, **self-censorship** is a move all teachers in Texas are considering given the political climate and laws here. Self-censorship is deciding to not teach a particular text, to keep some books off the classroom shelves, or to prevent student access to texts the teacher thinks may be deemed controversial because of fear of retribution by students, colleagues, administrators, or parents.

Both of these issues—parental rights and self-censorship—are important considerations at this moment, though neither are discussed at length below. The goal of this article is to offer support and guidance to teachers experiencing direct censorship and red-flagging.

### What's Going on in Texas?

According to a recent PEN Report, Texas leads the nation in book challenges and bans (Friedman & Johnson, 2022), most of which can be traced to Matt Krause's list of 800 books that he circulated—outside of any official job duties—to school districts (Waller, 2021). *The Houston Chronicle* compiled a database of challenged and banned books in the state (Dellinger & Serrano, 2022). Using public information requests, though only receiving responses from half of the state's school districts, *The Chronicle* found that Krause's list accelerated the challenges and bans, and North East ISD, in San Antonio, led the state in both reconsiderations and removed texts.

These book challenges and bans are being driven, in large part, by partisan politics. School board races across the state have also become politicized, even though such elections are purported to be nonpartisan. These races are also attracting far more political donors than in the past (Lopez, 2022). The legislative sessions of 2021 and 2023 have also fed the use of books as weapons in the culture war. SB3, from 2021, rewrote the social studies standards, excised the use of materials from *The 1619 Project* (n.d.) from public schools, and made it harder to teach concepts like unconscious bias, privilege, and systematic racism.

In June of 2023, Governor Abbott signed HB 900 (Restricting Explicit and Adult-Designated Educational Resources (READER) Act, 2023), which requires booksellers to rate books for sexual content and collect sales information from teachers and librarians, while also banning from public school libraries books that are "patently offensive." The definitions of offensive, relevant, or explicit are vague in the law (Asch, 2023), a purposeful choice legislators are making when crafting the educational gag orders passed in recent years (Young & Friedman, 2022). This law, then, creates a climate in which teachers and librarians are right to worry about how they could become ensnared in enforcement of potential legislation. This is all to say that the current political climate in Texas makes it challenging to be an English teacher who wants to offer their students diverse, contemporary, engaging novels.

### Three Steps: Prepare, Respond, Report

It used to be that when we talked about censorship with teachers, the conversation often started with "If you receive a book challenge..." Or we shared stories of the one parent who did not want their kid to read a book. The landscape of censorship is different now. It is

no longer *if* you will face censorship but *when*. That alone can feel scary and disheartening, and an actual challenge can feel worse. These three steps are designed to create a system that helps you be brave (Clear, 2018) and that you can lean on when that challenge happens.

1. **Prepare:** Using the resources outlined below, prepare for a book challenge. Create a plan for yourself and with your colleagues. Key to the plan are existing policies your school or district has around book challenges. By knowing the plan and being able to share the plan with parents and administrators, the challenge becomes not a you-against-them situation but, rather, an application of policy. The plan should also include curriculum rationales for text choices and when and how you'll reach out to allies and networks.
2. **Respond:** When you get the notice that a text you teach is being challenged, work the plan you created in step one. Stick to the policies you have identified and take care of yourself by leaning on your allies and networks for support. Challenges are a stressful time, on top of the regular demands of teaching.
3. **Report:** Tell NCTE you're experiencing censorship. NCTE shares with its partners and networks to get you the support you need, including letters of support from anti-censorship organizations. When you reach out to NCTE through the Intellectual Freedom Center, you get to work with a real human who can guide and support you.

Each challenge is different and happens in a unique context, and these three steps are adaptable to situations and contexts. Full disclosure, though! These three steps will not prevent direct censorship; they will simply prepare you to respond to a challenge. Nonetheless, we continue working to prevent censorship so that the students whose lives are represented in the books being challenged can see someone fighting for their stories. We stand up for diverse stories so that our students can see that people they value—their teachers—value them and their stories. We do this work because we know that all of these stories matter.

### Friends and Allies

When a book challenge happens to a book you teach, it can feel very isolating. At least with natural disasters, we know our whole community is impacted, and there is comfort in coming together to see one another through. The same idea can apply to situations when books you teach are challenged. Hard things always seem a little more doable when surrounded by friends and allies.

At department or team meetings, take time to talk through your shared texts. Talk about why you love some books, or why other books were hard to read. Get to know one another as readers. Then, when a challenge happens, you can lean on these colleagues to support you and enact your brave system.

As you communicate with parents and caregivers about books you'll be reading with their children, seek to identify parents who may be allies in keeping diverse books in the classroom. At back-to-school night, ask what people's favorite books are and why they love them. During conferences, ask if they are talking to their children about books or if they have any good books they have read recently. Parents can be allies who talk to the principal and go to the school board to advocate for diverse books.

You are not alone. Become informed, make friends, and gather your allies now.

### Resources

NCTE, through its Intellectual Freedom Center (IFC), offers three

main types of support for teachers: an extensive book rationale database for commonly challenged titles, guides for developing plans and response to challenges, and direct support during a challenge.

- **This Story Matters:** This book rationale database for NCTE members includes short rationales teachers can use and adapt as they plan for both instruction and potential challenges. The rationales include basic information on the book, links to teaching resources, discussions of why the book may be challenged, an argument for how this book is unique as an instructional resource, and alternative titles for parent requests.
- **Guides:** Along with the National Coalition Against Censorship, NCTE has written several different guides for preparing for book challenges and responding to them.

In addition to these resources, NCTE and the IFC regularly provide webinars for NCTE members that focus on responses to censorship. Other organizations that are creating workshops and training around censorship include the American Library Association and School Library Journal. Follow these organizations on social media and subscribe to their newsletters to stay plugged in to the latest resources (see also Table 1).

NCTE Resources	
NCTE's This Story Matters Rationale Database	<a href="https://ncte.org/book-rationales/this-story-matters/">https://ncte.org/book-rationales/this-story-matters/</a>
Incident Reporting	
NCTE Censorship Report Incident form	<a href="https://ncte.org/report-censorship-incident/">https://ncte.org/report-censorship-incident/</a>
NCAC Censorship Report Incident form	<a href="https://ncac.org/report-censorship-form">https://ncac.org/report-censorship-form</a>
Guides for Developing Policies and Procedures (and more)	
NCTE Guidelines: • Selecting classroom resources • Censorship of instructional materials • Position statements on Students' Right to Read and more...	<a href="https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/">https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/</a>
NCAC Considerations and Guidelines for School Officials	<a href="https://ncac.org/news/blog/guidelines-school-officials">https://ncac.org/news/blog/guidelines-school-officials</a>
NCAC School Book Challenge Resource Center	<a href="https://ncac.org/resource/book-challenge-resource-center">https://ncac.org/resource/book-challenge-resource-center</a>

Table 1. Censorship Resources

### This Is Not a Natural Disaster

Book challenges are not a natural consequence of anything, unlike a fire or hurricane. They are the result of a media landscape that has leaned into disinformation and misinformation, a political landscape that is more focused on vilifying the other than building up everyone, and a school system that has been systematically undermined for decades. Whereas weather is a result of physics, all of these things are the result of people making decisions, and people can always make different decisions.

There are actions you can take to help people make different decisions. And those actions make a difference for you, the students in your classroom, families in your community, and the state as a whole.

- Do the work to include diverse books in your classroom and curriculum. Fill out the paperwork, go to the meetings, and do the research. The students who pick up those books will thank you for it.

- Communicate with your students' families about the books they will be reading and why those books matter for their learning. Find your parent allies who want diverse books and will have your back when a challenge arises.
- Talk to your neighbors about why you teach diverse books and why your students need them. Ask for their support should a challenge arise.
- Write to your elected representatives at all levels—local school board, Texas Legislature, State Board of Education, and your federal representatives. Advocacy matters and changes policies.

Being an English teacher right now is a challenge; there is no denying it. And that is without stories of censorship in the news every day. But most people want diverse books in their schools (American Library Association, 2022). And most parents—89%—think their child's public school is a good one (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). So, as you consider your fall reading list, also prepare for a challenge, even as you hope it will not come. In preparing, you will develop a more robust curriculum, you will bond with your colleagues by talking about books, and your students will have the opportunity to see themselves in the curriculum and learn about others through the curriculum.

We are hopeful for a future in which diverse classroom libraries abound, the curriculum represents the diversity of Texas, and English teachers get to match kids with the just-right book. And if we all work together, that future is ours.

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