

**Prompt:** Escambia County, a conservative county in Florida, currently has prevalent book bans in their public schools. These bans censor important issues from school curriculums, preventing students from receiving an education that effectively encompasses the diverse histories and life experiences of all people. Therefore, this memo implores the Escambia County School Board to use their curriculum implementation and oversight abilities to reform book bans. As educators, we are tasked with recommending reforms to improve student education by reducing censorship and maintaining access to banned books.

**To:** Escambia County School Board

**From:** Allie Vorley, Camryn Friedman, Owen Brent-Levenstein; Educators

**Date:** 12/16/24

**Re:** Addressing book bans in Escambia County Public Schools

Prevalent book bans in Escambia County harm students' education and restrict educators' autonomy. We recommend replacing the ban with an opt-out system and increasing book ban education and parental involvement. This combination is the most feasible way to compromise between stakeholders regarding a contentious issue in a highly conservative county.

## **Background**

In Escambia County, 97% of the religious population identifies as Christian (ARDA, 2020). 46% of citizens are registered Republicans, with only 30% registered as Democrats (Bender, 2024). Additionally, 69% of the county is white (The US Census, 2023). The lack of religious, political, and racial diversity means many students in Escambia may lack exposure to diverse perspectives that banned books provide.

## **Problem**

Books with authors or characters that are women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color are banned at a disproportionate rate (Goncalves et al., 2024). Thus, students lose the ability to learn about others different from themselves, and many lose valuable representation of their own identity (Kirpalani & Natanson, 2023). Further, book bans violate students' First Amendment right to receive information, negatively impacting their education (Li, 2024). Teachers and librarians lose autonomy in curriculum decisions and dedicate more time to compiling books for approval, hindering their ability to do their job (Kirpalani & Natanson, 2023). In 2021-2022, US schools banned more books than any previous year (Goncalves et al., 2024). Book bans are especially prevalent in Florida; Escambia County Public Schools banned over 1,600 books in 2022 (Kirpalani & Natanson, 2023).

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Replace full ban with opt-out system.** This allows parents to select specific books to restrict for their child. Considering Escambia County's political environment, it is not feasible to fully remove the ban. In May and November of 2023, publishers, authors, students, and parents filed two separate lawsuits challenging Escambia book bans. Pressure from litigation effectively resulted in 24 previously-restricted books returned to shelves, but the book ban remained ("PEN America," 2024). An opt-out system forms a compromise; concerned parents can regulate their child's educational content without inhibiting all students' education or reducing educators' autonomy. Opt-out systems were successfully implemented in Polk County and Flagler County, Florida (Johnson, 2023; Lora, 2022). In Flagler County, only 4 out of 12,683 students have restricted access. 700 individuals completed the form selecting level of book access, showing engagement with the program and awareness of families' options (Johnson, 2023). The primary risk

opt-out systems pose is creating inequity in the education of students with different levels of access. Escambia schools can address this by providing alternate assignments to students that cannot access assigned materials (Lora, 2022).

- 2. Increase education about book bans.** Schools should keep controversial literature in the curriculum, but address the controversy and present both sides. This prioritizes student learning because directly addressing the controversy increases education (Savat, 2022). Additionally, since book bans are often used to silence marginalized voices, they censor schools' curriculums, diminishing the quality of education (Gilbard, 2023; Goncalves et al., 2024). To get a comprehensive and effective education, students must be exposed to many subjects and learn about groups both similar to and different from themselves (Savat, 2022). For Escambia County to implement this change while reducing parental controversy, the school board must establish workshops to train teachers and school administrators in teaching banned books.
- 3. Increase parental involvement.** Many book bans are implemented under the guise of parental rights (Empson, 2023). Increasing parental involvement to protect their rights addresses this rationale. Schools in Escambia County should notify all parents about the district's book ban changes, emphasizing the educational importance. This should include in-person and virtual notifications (meetings and emails) to ensure everyone receives the information. This also provides parents an opportunity to give feedback about the opt-out system, further increasing involvement. Parents are key stakeholders in the banned book debate. Many parents in Escambia County disagree with this wave of censorship, voicing this through lawsuits (Palma, 2023). Involving parents in the decisions is critical, both to mitigate backlash and to educate them on the goals of these changes.

Escambia County schools will likely experience some short-term backlash from these policy changes. However, considering about two-thirds of American adults oppose book restrictions, the majority would favor these recommendations (Soule, 2024). While Escambia County might experience more criticism from book ban supporters than a liberal region, there is currently backlash from those who oppose the bans, as demonstrated by the aforementioned lawsuits (Bender, 2024; Soule, 2024; Kirpalani & Natanson, 2023; Palma, 2023). Therefore, overall criticism would not necessarily increase; it would shift to those who support book bans rather than oppose them.

### **Implementation**

The primary consideration for replacing a full ban with an opt-out system is ensuring all parents are informed. It is crucial that affected parties learn about the change so their perspective can be acknowledged, preventing backlash from those who feel blindsided (Carratt, 2020). While increasing parental involvement should combat this issue, the information is not guaranteed to reach everyone. Language barriers, limited access to technology, and busy work schedules hinder schools' ability to engage with parents (Baker et al., 2016). To ensure all parents are able to provide input, schools should require online acknowledgement that parents are aware of the opt-out system.

To effectively increase education surrounding the books, teachers require proper training. It is crucial that teachers know how to create safe spaces, communicate with parents, properly teach the material, and manage criticism (Anderson, 2019). Our second recommendation introduces workshops to address this. We recommend reallocating the significant budget dedicated to reviewing and banning books and defending lawsuits to fund these workshops (Soule, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

Book bans in Escambia County have censored diverse perspectives and restricted teachers. We recommend finding a compromise by implementing an opt-out system, increasing education around the books, and increasing parental involvement. The county should require parents to acknowledge the opt-out system and teachers to attend educational workshops. This approach is the first step in decreasing censorship, and in the future, Escambia County could consider fully repealing book bans.

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