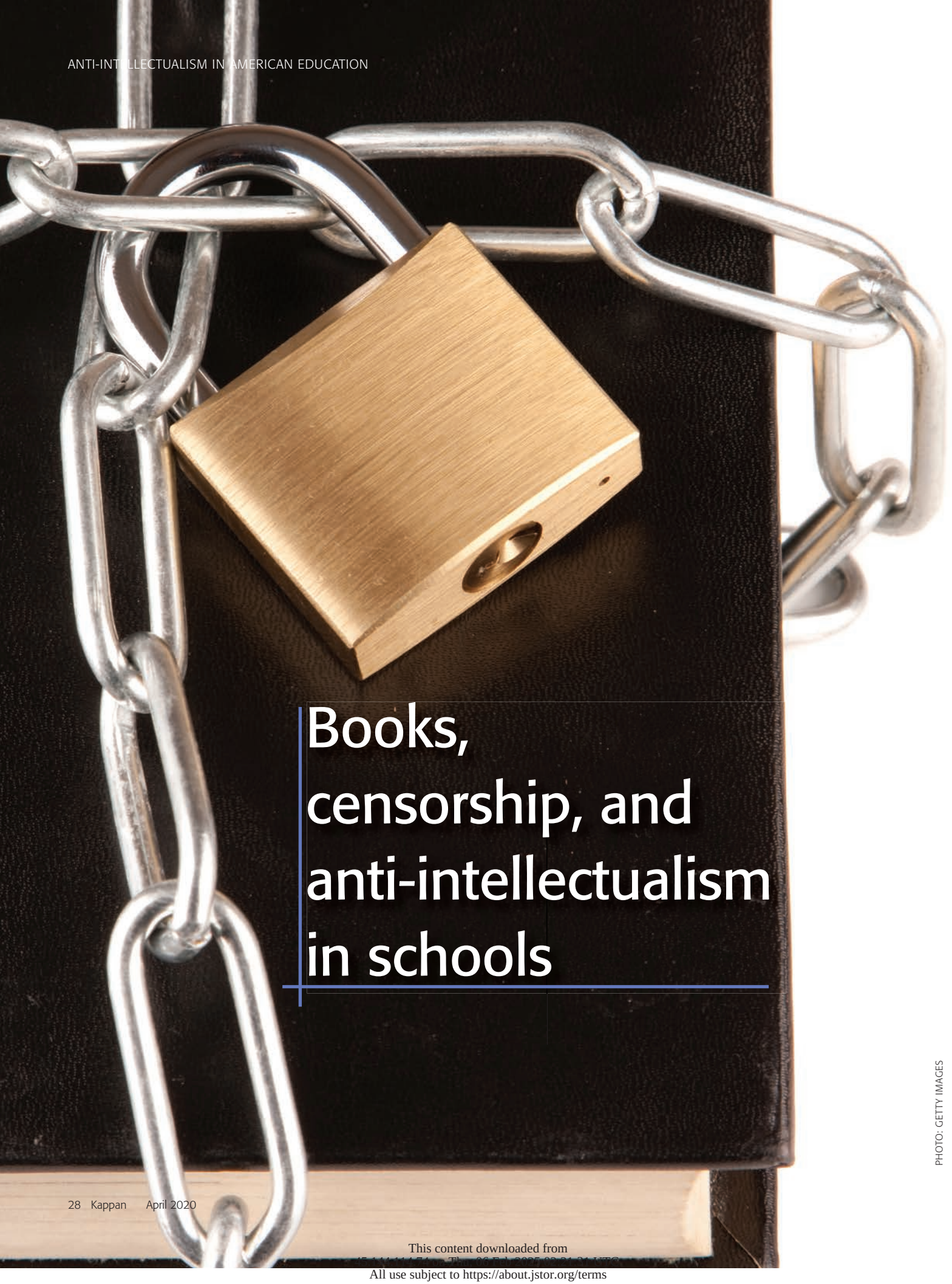

Books, censorship, and anti-intellectualism in schools

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Efforts to remove certain books from schools are rooted in a strong belief in the power of books to introduce people to new ideas and to change their minds.

By **Emily J.M. Knox**

The book plays an outsized role in intellectual life. Because there is a taken-for-granted correspondence between reading books and the life of the mind, research on intellectualism often focuses on how much individuals read. For example, in his article "Anti-intellectualism is a virus," Michael Peters (2018) writes about a book he read in childhood: "It was the second book I had read and I was 15-16 years old at that stage! . . . I don't know what sparked my interest in ideas. There were no books in our home" (p. 360). In Peters' formulation, there is no gap between the ideas that he's taken an interest in and the books that contain them.

In an article on anti-intellectualism in U.S. schools, Aimee Howley, Edwina Pendarvis, and Craig Howley (1993) discuss what they perceive as a lack of intellectualism among teachers by focusing on their reading habits, noting that care for intellect "involves attention to the thinking subject, the minds of students, and equally important our own minds as those who care for students" (p. 11). Their characterization of the intellectual life of teachers is worth quoting at length as it provides a succinct overview of why reading is considered to be of paramount importance when discussing intellectualism:

> For several reasons, measures of teachers' reading are appropriate indicators of their scholarly interests. First, reading is, by its nature, an intellectual act, requiring the reader to reflect on what is written and construct meaning from it . . . Readers tend, therefore, to be more reflective and more critical than nonreaders. Second, reading provides access to content that is available nowhere else. Since text is such an efficient means of storing ideas, it is the medium most often used for that purpose. People who are concerned with ideas (i.e., those with academic interests) must frequently encounter text in order to compare and contrast their ideas with those of others. Finally, reading provides entry to the intellectual forum in which scholarly dialogue takes place. As a consequence, those who read widely in a field are more likely than others to make a significant contribution to that field. (p. 8)

Beyond a correspondence between books and ideas, it is often implied that only certain types of books are considered to be intellectual. In an article on anti-intellectualism and librarianship, David Isaacson (1982), for example, expressed this view when he declared that "it is not sufficient even that a librarian be well-informed. Keeping up with the news or the latest best sellers is not equivalent to a liberal education . . . What is necessary for the librarian, is that his or her intellect be focused on library concerns" (p. 230). In this view, intellectualism demands effort; therefore, reading romance novels is not considered an intellectual endeavor. Only certain types of books are considered to contain worthy ideas.

In many respects, anti-intellectualism is essentially a stance against "book learning" and is often contrasted to learning through bodily movement or "by doing." As Peters (2018) notes above, he grew up in a house without books, by which he suggests that his childhood home was not a place where ideas mattered. In his classic work, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter (1963) writes that anti-intellectualism "is not a single proposition but a complex of related propositions" that can be characterized as a "resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life" (p. 7). Books are tangible representations of this life of the mind; therefore, it is not surprising that they are the targets of censorship.

Book challengers and their motivations

My research centers on people who attempt to censor books (called challengers) in public libraries and schools. I am less interested in the actual

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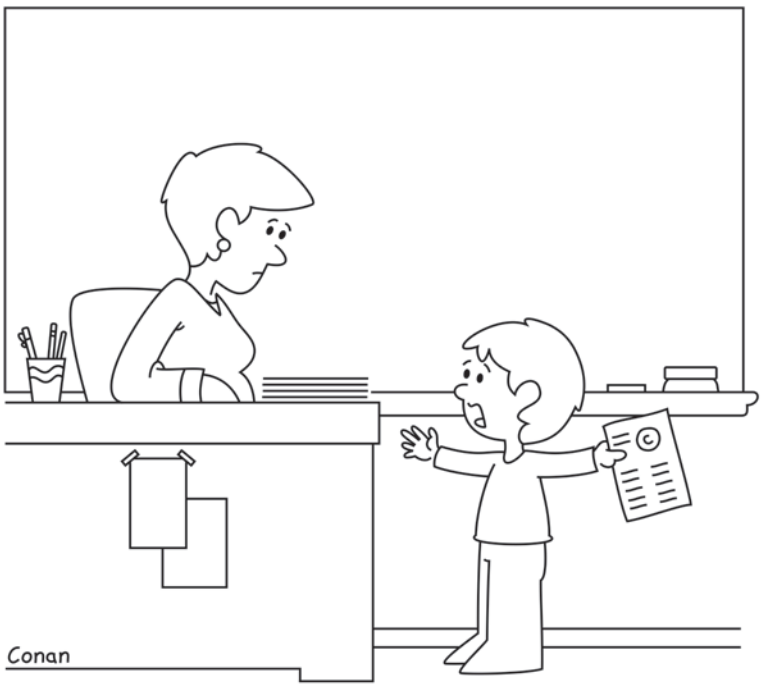
content of the books that are targeted than I am in people's underlying motivations for requesting that books be redacted, restricted, relocated, or removed in the first place. The American Library Association has collected voluntary statistics on challenged books since 1982, and the titles run the gamut from the Bible to Angie Thomas' 2017 young adult novel *The Hate U Give*. Some of the more common reasons given for challenging materials include sexual content, the presence of LGBTQ+ characters, and unsuitability for the age group. These are what I call the "stated reasons" for challenging books. The actual practice of censorship, however, is a complex phenomenon that is intimately related to how people interpret certain texts and their attitudes toward the book as an object.

Challengers often argue that books should contain good or true ideas because, in many respects, books reify the information in the text that is contained within them. That is, ideas that are found in books are deemed true because books contain true ideas. Thus, according to this circular logic, if the ideas in books are not true, then those ideas should not only *not* be contained in a book but the book itself should be removed so that its ideas do not become true. Books that do not fulfill their role as a vessel for acceptable ideas are dubbed *trash* or *filth*.

In my own work (Knox, 2015), I have argued that the importance of the book in Western society is based in the Christian Protestant tradition of *sola scriptura*, or salvation by scripture alone. The problem is not that anti-intellectuals do not believe in the power of books but that they believe in it strongly. Under the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, a single book can bring someone salvation; therefore, it follows that books have power. The right book may be able to save, but the wrong one may bring damnation. It is important to keep in mind that this belief in the power of books is shared across many ideologies and creeds, but the primacy of the book is fundamental to understanding how education is structured in Western societies.



"If you go into it looking for mistakes, of course you're going to find some!"

In his analysis of Hofstadter, Daniel Rigney (1991) notes that *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* discusses three types of anti-intellectualism: anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. The third type is evident in the drive for school reform in the United States in which STEM and other "practical" subjects are privileged over other types of education. Anti-elitism is evident in current disdain for experts and their knowledge of such topics as climate change and vaccinations. But it is the first type, anti-rationalism, that comes to the fore when considering censorship in schools. One aspect of anti-rationalism, absolutism versus relativism, plays an outsized role in the discourse and practice of censorship. As Hofstadter (1963) notes:

> To those who suspect that intellect is a subversive force in society, it will not do to reply that intellect is really a safe, bland, and emollient thing. In a certain sense the suspicious Tories and militant philistines are right: intellect is dangerous. Left free, there is nothing it will not reconsider, analyze, throw into question (p. 45)

This is what book challengers understand — that intellectualism is dangerous and books are instrumental for the creation of intellectuals.

Canon, curriculum, and coercion

My research has demonstrated that two aspects of education are important for understanding the discourse of censorship in schools. First, as noted above, the book is central to the practice and process of education and growing in understanding of ideas. Second, the curriculum is coercive in nature, exposing people to ideas they might not have encountered on their own. If one of the goals

of education is to give students the cultural capital they need to be citizens in a democracy, then they must read books of the canon in order to be considered "educated." But this need to read certain books that may contain controversial ideas clashes with America's anti-intellectual ethos since, by definition, people who have read these books and designated them as canon are often intellectuals.

Further, recent years have seen many calls to expand the canon to include a much greater diversity of authors. The We Need Diverse Books campaign, a nonprofit advocacy organization, provides a good working definition of diversity as including voices of "LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural and religious minorities." As books by and about people with these identities have been added to elementary and secondary school curricula and libraries, they have been the target of challengers. Of 10 books on the American Library Association's most challenged book list for 2018, at least six books could be considered diverse. A seventh, the *Skippy Jon Jones* series, was challenged for a lack of sensitivity to diversity and stereotypes of Mexicans.

In my research on challenges to diverse books (Knox, 2019), I found that racially diverse books are targeted for oblique reasons — the challenger states the book is unsuitable for the intended age group or that a different book by someone who shares the identity of the challenged book's author would be just as good. The power of books is undisputed in these challenges. In 2012, for example, a challenger who wanted to remove Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* from school libraries in Fairfax, Virginia, stated in a request for reconsideration form obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request that:

> The frequency of rape and bestiality for slaves during the time period is likely to come across to adolescents, but it is unclear how they will interpret this information. Although it is negatively portrayed, will reading explicit information, including the major characters in the book, lead adolescents to think that humans inevitability treat one another this way? Or, that when sexual partners are not available, bestiality is the frequent result? The messages and interpretations are complex and include many issues of sexuality.

According to the challengers, the book would have such power that students would be compelled to think that human beings are destined to treat one another terribly. Although the challenger states that "the messages and interpretations are complex," they focus on only one possible interpretation of the book.

> Teachers should give students many books to read because each book reveals something that gets one closer to the truth, not because one particular book contains all truths.

Questions regarding which books belong in the canon — and, by extension, the curriculum — are important because by its nature, curriculum demands compliance. Students must read certain books, or they will not be able to move to the next level. This coercive aspect of education is often top of mind for challengers to books in public school curricula, and their behavior hinges on one aspect of anti-intellectualism — the fear of indoctrination. Educational theorists (see Snook, 1970) have argued that indoctrination has four main components: intent, content, method, and outcome. In a book banning case in Tucson, Arizona, I found that people who argued for the removal of certain ethnic studies books, including *Occupied American: A History of Chicanos* by Rodolfo Acuna and *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* by Bill Bigelow, felt that teachers have a distinct intent to teach particular content, to use only certain methods, and to expect a particular *outcome* (Knox, 2017).

When it comes to book challenges, the content of curriculum is usually the target. In the Tucson case, challengers perceived the books in the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program as tools of indoctrination. For example, one challenger in 2011 stated:

> The books are not about history. The books are not about ethnicity … first the books are classical showpieces of Marxist re-indoctrination. They are about political oppression, incessant deprecation of anything not Chicano, including the US Constitution, capitalism, and anything European or of European culture. That's what the books said.

Although the Tucson case is, in some respects, atypical in that the MAS program was actually part of a 1978 desegregation order and resistance to the program was part of a clash over changing demographics in Arizona, the fear of indoctrination through books was quite prevalent in the challenges. The fear was so strong that all of the books that were part of the MAS program were packed up in boxes marked "Banned Books — Please Remove" and locked away in storage until being returned to the classroom in 2013. Although the school district was found to have violated students' rights in 2017 and there was an effort to revive MAS in 2018, there is not currently a Mexican American Studies program in Tucson public schools.

Meeting the challengers

What can be done in the face of these fears of intellectualism and the power of books? First, it is important to have policies that protect the professional decisions of teachers in schools. Every school should have approved policies and procedures for choosing curriculum materials and responding when those materials are challenged.

Second, as Peters (2018) notes, it is important to name anti-intellectualism as a threat to liberal society:

> Only a pedagogy that names and recognizes these threats and works hard to deal with them can possibly be called "intellectual" in the sense that "teachers as intellectuals" — indeed, as philosophers — realize that ideas matter, that malignant ideas brewed out of prejudice can dupe and hurt people, and that their status desperately needs problematizing. (p. 362)

Finally, teachers themselves must adopt a more expansive idea of truth. In his article "On the lived experience of truth," Matthew Kruger-Ross (2019) writes that what matters more is "how human beings experience truth than whether or not there is such a thing as truth" (p. 153). Teachers should give students many books to read because each book reveals something that gets one closer to the truth, not because one particular book contains all truths. When teachers adopt this approach and express this attitude, it is easier to provide clear justifications for including a book in the curriculum and to respond to threats of censorship from those who argue that objectionable intellectual content should be removed from curricula. Each book is but one perspective out of many, not the final answer.

My analysis of the discourse of censorship suggests that the people who try to remove books from school curriculum and library collections tend to believe strongly in the power of books. We can understand this attitude if we accept the power of books to change people's minds, which is, of course, the whole point of education. As I tell my students, it is no mistake that my syllabus includes books and articles that I hope will lead them to wrestle with ideas. By the end of the course, I hope they will have integrated these ideas and concepts into their own understanding of the world, even if that means disagreeing with some of those ideas. This process of changing an individual through education is exactly what censors are trying to control when they target books in public libraries and schools. ◼

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