

Power Poll: School Library Fights

Despite activists' concerns, community leaders largely trust librarians to make decisions about materials for students.

BY JESSE FOX MAYSHARK • APRIL 19, 2024



At a glance, there is little evidence that Knox County families are too worked up about books and other materials in school libraries.

Even Florida – the most active book-banning state – has recently pulled back.

Although Knox County Schools has a long-established policy by which parents, students or staff can object to the presence of books in a school library or class curriculum, district officials say they receive few such complaints. There was only one book challenged in the 2022-23 school year, and that has risen to seven districtwide this year.

This month's Power Poll suggests that most community leaders likewise have few concerns and trust librarians to guide the development and maintenance of school collections.

The issue has been thrust into the local spotlight by the Knox County chapter of Moms for Liberty, the national conservative activist group that has challenged books — often the same books, drawn from nationally curated lists — in schools across the country.

Partly in response to those concerns, Superintendent Jon Rysewyk's administration announced earlier this month that it was forming new Library Councils at every school, which will each include a parent representative. In addition, new committees made up of current school librarians will conduct “proactive” reviews of titles known to be “sensitive,” even if they haven't been directly challenged.

The push by conservative groups has led to an increase in book-banning across the country. PEN America, the national nonprofit organization that advocates for freedom of expression, issued a report this week warning of a “crisis” in the number of books being removed from school shelves.

A total of 4,349 books were banned in schools nationwide in the fall semester of 2023, nearly triple the 1,521 banned in the fall of 2022.

“Since July 2021, PEN America has recorded book bans in 42 states,” the report says. “These bans have frequently occurred as a result of state legislation and/or activity from groups like Moms for Liberty.”

There have been 364 books banned from schools in Tennessee during that time. By far the largest number of bans has been in Florida, where Moms for Liberty was founded in 2021.

Even with that trend, surveys at state and national levels consistently show that removing books from libraries or curriculums is not popular. According to the EveryLibrary Institute, a nonprofit organization that tracks book bans and public attitudes, a national poll in September 2022 found that 91 percent of registered voters strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement “If you don’t like a book at a library, don’t check it out. Other people shouldn’t be able to control what me or my family can read.”

A statewide poll in Tennessee in April 2022 found that 68 percent of Tennesseans were strongly or somewhat opposed to removing any books from library shelves. Only 27 percent strongly or somewhat supported banning certain books.

Those kinds of numbers help illustrate why even Florida this year enacted new legislation to somewhat limit the ability of activists to challenge books. It caps the number of challenges anyone can make in a district where they do not have a child

enrolled to one per month. In signing the bill on Tuesday, Gov. Ron DeSantis — who tried to fuel his failed presidential campaign by stoking culture war issues — seemed to back off a little from his previously aggressive posture.

“I think what's happened is you have some people who are taking the curriculum transparency, and they're trying to weaponize that for political purposes,” he said.

(In Florida in particular, Moms for Liberty has come in for some disrepute because of a sex-and-assault scandal involving one of its founders and her husband, a former chair of the state Republican Party.)

The Power Poll is not a scientific survey — it is a monthly assessment of the views of local leaders in government, business and the nonprofit sectors. But this month's edition shows that their opinions strongly mirror those found in broader polling.

Out of 798 people invited to participate, 294 responded, for a response rate of 37 percent. Out of those, 71 percent said that they were either “not very concerned” (27 percent) or “not at all concerned” (44 percent) that there might be age-inappropriate material in Knox County Schools libraries.

Only 12 percent were “very concerned,” with another 16 percent “somewhat concerned.”

As to who should lead the decision-making when it comes to selecting, reviewing and removing books from school libraries, 62 percent said it should be librarians. Tied for second place

with 13 percent each were “parents” and “school board members.” Smaller numbers thought the decisions should be led by principals, state officials or students.

The vast majority of respondents — 83 percent — said that if a parent or student is offended by particular materials, they should work directly with the school librarian to opt out of access to it (which is allowed by current policy). Six percent thought they should file a formal challenge through the district’s existing process. Only 2 percent favored presenting specific, out-of-context portions of text at school board meetings — a common tactic of Moms for Liberty — in the hopes of getting materials banned countywide.

Still, a strong majority of 61 percent said they thought the new review procedures the district has put in place will lead to some books being removed from libraries.

Here are the full questions and responses:

How concerned are you that there might be age-inappropriate material in Knox County Schools libraries?

Very concerned: 12 percent

Somewhat concerned: 16 percent

Not very concerned: 27 percent

Not at all concerned: 44 percent

No opinion: 0 percent (one person selected this option)

Who should take the lead in deciding what materials to add to or remove from public school libraries?

Librarians: 62 percent

Parents: 13 percent

Principals: 8 percent

School board members: 13 percent

State officials: 2 percent

Students: 1 percent

If there are library materials available that personally offend a parent or student, what should they do?

Talk to the librarian or teacher about opting the student out of access to those materials: 83 percent

File a challenge to attempt to have the book removed from access for all students: 6 percent

Read specific explicit passages out loud at school board meetings in hopes of banning the materials districtwide: 2 percent

Other: 8 percent

Do you think the school system's new review process for "sensitive titles" will lead to books being pulled from district shelves?

Yes: 61 percent

No: 4 percent

Unsure: 35 percent



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