Megan Perryman has been a librarian in Pocatello, Idaho, for over a decade. But this year, she says, feels heavier than before.

“I feel like I have to be in five places at once,” she says. “It’s constant organizing, helping students, dealing with policy changes. It’s just… nonstop” (Spall).

Like many educators, Perryman starts each day before dawn. The alarm rings, she snoozes, then drags herself out of bed to begin another unpaid overtime shift. The library never rests. Neither does she. A constant cycle of responsibilities, where being organized means being everywhere at once. Always moving. Always multitasking. Always working overtime—unpaid overtime.

Long hours, low wages—it’s a familiar story across the world, but especially in Idaho’s school districts. But for Megan, after ten years working in the library, this year feels heavier than the rest.

As the librarian at Century High School in Pocatello, Idaho, Megan Perryman is constantly juggling tasks. Her day revolves around meeting the needs of students, teachers, and the broader school community—selecting, acquiring, and organizing resources to ensure they’re accessible and useful. The demands are endless. Keeping everything on schedule and running smoothly is no small feat. Jumping from task to task drains time and energy, and Megan often finds herself wondering how she manages it all. It’s demanding work—essential but often overlooked.

Being a librarian is one of those thankless jobs that people only pay attention to when something goes wrong. In Idaho librarians the lack of appreciation is pronounced. Few things highlight this more clearly than a recent bill passed by the Idaho House of Representatives, which could lead to the persecution of librarians for distributing ‘harmful material', that just passed through the Idaho House of Representatives.

Bills like this are dangerous, the vague language creates a chilling effect that pressures librarians like Megan censor content preemptively out of fear used, and fits within major trends that defund schools, and the libraries that serve them.

Megan expresses fear over this bill explaining that “I feel threatened that if I don’t know what is contained in every book in the library, I could go to jail” (Spall).

This bill would have librarians face a $1,000 fine and jail time for providing the material vaguely deemed obscene. The fine is a threat to all Idaho librarians to comply, because they have no other choice.

In practice, it will often be safer for librarians to remove any material that might even potentially be considered harmful, since the burden of prosecution falls directly on them. School districts typically offer little to no protection. Even a false accusation can be devastating—emotionally, financially, and professionally—especially when facing the cost and stress of a legal battle. The bill effectively hands individuals the power to intimidate and silence librarians through the threat of litigation.

Much of the material targeted by the bill includes content that relates to LGBTQ topics. The term “harmful material” is never clearly defined, but in practice, it often refers to any LGBTQ representation—framing it as inherently obscene. “Some of the most popular books in the library have LGBT characters or themes,” Megan says. “I want to give students the chance to experience books that they might relate to or find comfort in” (Spall). As a librarian, her goal is to connect students with meaningful resources—stories that reflect their identities and experiences. For LGBTQ students, or any students who feel marginalized or isolated, the library can be wonderful space. This bill would take that away.

While this bill is scary for educators across Idaho, it is a long time coming and mirrors many anti-intellectual trends that have been on the rise across the United States, such as Florida’s Parental Rights in Education bill, colloquially known as the Don’t Say Gay bill.

A 2018 study analyzing anti-intellectual attitudes across America found that these views are increasingly influencing public opinion (Motta 483). Such attitudes pose a direct threat to educators and librarians who strive to provide quality information to students, as they actively work to hinder intellectual development. Today, these anti-intellectual sentiments are not only shaping public opinion but are also being translated into actual policy decisions, putting education and critical thinking at risk.

Behind the scenes in the everyday functioning of a library there is a tenuous and often fragile relationship between schools, libraries, school boards, students, and those students' parents.

School boards wield significant power in shaping the direction of education, from hiring superintendents to setting policies, curriculum, and budgets. The composition of these boards is largely influenced by politics and money, two powerful forces that often shape their decisions.

School budgets are frequently defunded, with a growing narrative that schools should be reduced in size align with certain political ideologies—often labeled as "too liberal." Many critics view the content in libraries through this lens, calling it “too liberal” or “obscene,” with some going so far as to label it as indoctrination. These anti-intellectual attitudes are increasingly spilling over into policy decisions, especially as more parent activists gain influence on school boards.

Megan is certain that the members of Pocatello School District 25’s school board all want the best for the students and try their best to help the school in general but playing the political and money games makes that difficult, especially with the number of competing interests that exist.

However, it’s difficult for her to ignore the unsettling reality: between 2009 and 2016, there was a 19% decline in librarian positions across the country (Lance). This sharp reduction isn’t just a budgetary issue, it reflects a broader trend of anti-intellectualism that continues to erode support for educational roles like hers.

Even though a school board may want to do the right thing and protect its librarians many times it can be a case of choosing the right battles, especially when certain battles can explode legal battles or nationwide controversies, which only feed the flames of anti-intellectualism. The politics and financial pressures surrounding school boards create a cycle—media-fueled controversies lead to more book challenges, more restrictive legislation targeting educators, and further defunding of public schools.

While statewide or national policies may carry the most visible impact, they’re relatively infrequent. What’s more constant—and in many ways more dangerous—are the parents who take matters into their own hands. This is where book bans begin. When someone objects to a book, they can initiate a long, exhausting process to have it reviewed and potentially removed. Megan explains how such a challenge would unfold at Century High School:

“There is a high potential of something with banning books happening in Pocatello. If there was a challenge, we are planning on putting on a challenge review committee to review the challenge, including the person who brought the challenge forward. It is composed of librarians, teachers, parents, and even students, and everyone fills out a form to find out what the issue is to determine if it should be removed. Then it is a group decision on whether the book is removed or not” (Spall).

As an experienced librarian, Megan dreads the possibility. Not just because of how time-consuming and draining the process is, but because book challenges make censorship painfully real. Each one is a reminder of how easily students' access to diverse perspectives and information can be stripped away.

Banning books has a strong negative effect on students. One of the critical functions of a library is the diverse number of stories and information they provide, much of this information students would otherwise not have access to.

Libraries have books that tackle the topics of race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, mental illness, and disability. Students can explore these topics freely to gain a much stronger and more nuanced understanding of the world. Even if a book presents sensitive topics in a problematic or imperfect way, it still offers an opportunity for students to engage with those issues in a safe, structured environment—one where they can ask questions, reflect, and better understand the world around them.

Without a diverse set of books, there are real consequences for students. As Lourdes Enriquez, an opinion writer for *New University*, argues, “By banning novels that contain stories filled with social issues and minority groups, we are inevitably dooming students to a youth filled with confusion, misguidance, and loneliness” (Enriquez). Ignoring or censoring the existence of certain identities or experiences makes it harder for students to understand themselves and the world around them in a healthy, informed way.

Students are in a critical stage of learning and growing, and when they have questions, it is far better that they find answers in a safe and supportive place like a library rather than through unsafe or misleading sources. For many, books are not just sources of information, they are mirrors and lifelines. Seeing themselves reflected in a story can help students express their identities, feel less alone, and better navigate their experiences. Without access to these books, students risk being left isolated, unheard, and unseen.

Against all this Megan keeps hope by doing the little, but important, things to help promote the library and make libraries stronger. One of her favorites of these important activities is banned book week. Banned book week is an event that Megan puts on in the library every year to highlight the problem of banned books and often how silly the attempt to ban books can be.

During Banned Book Week, what she does is take many of the most famous or popular books that have been challenged or banned and puts them on display. The list of books that have been banned is longer than it might seem and includes Harry Potter, The Great Gatsby, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Lord of the Flies, and The Hunger Games.

Many of these books are either embedded deeply in popular culture or have obtained classic status and many times are even required reading in schools. Megan also makes sure to decorate the library to welcome students into the library to read the books. “It’s a fun part of the culture at the library” she explains, “the students love it and enjoy how silly it is that some of these books have been banned” (Spall).

It is quite hilarious that a book such as Harry Potter would be banned, and it does make you scrunch your nose and tilt your head when a book like the Giver is considered bannable material.

With banned book week she is trying to help build the community in the face of all the backlash on certain books. This event is fun and lighthearted, but it points out the serious issues that libraries across the country must deal with.

For Megan Perryman, even something as simple as putting up decorations becomes an act of quiet resistance, a way to turn the stress and uncertainty of being a librarian in Idaho into something joyful and student-centered. Celebrating books and highlighting their value is a response to those who seek to challenge or remove them. Amid the growing pressures, Megan remains committed to ensuring students have access to stories that inspire, comfort, and reflect them. The hope is that libraries will continue to be places of inclusion, exploration, and learning—spaces where every student can find something meaningful, and where no book worth reading quietly disappears from the shelf.

Works Cited

Enriquez, Lourdes. “Banning Books Does More Harm than Good.” *New University | UC Irvine*, New University, 27 Nov. 2021, https://www.newuniversity.org/2021/11/26/banning-books-does-more-harm-than-good/.

Hawkins, David J. *Celebration of Banned Book Week*. 2017, https://csunshinetoday.csun.edu/arts-and-culture/share-a-laugh-at-banned-book-readout/

Lance, Keith Curry. “School Librarian, Where Art Thou?” *School Library Journal*, 16 Mar. 2018, https://www.slj.com/story/school-librarian-art-thou.

Motta, Matthew. “The Dynamics and Political Implications of Anti-Intellectualism in the United States.” American Politics Research, vol. 46, no. 3, May 2018, pp. 465–98. EBSCOhost, https://doi-org.libproxy.boisestate.edu/10.1177/1532673X17719507.

Spall, Matthew, and Megan Perryman. “Interview with Librarian on Banning Books.” 2022.