

The Ethical Issues Behind Schools Banning Books

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Book banning has been around for centuries, but within the last few years, it has spiked dramatically, specifically in school districts. The rising demand of books to be removed from school libraries, classrooms, and curriculum took a significant turn for the worst last year in 2022. In 2022, the American Library Association (ALA) found that there were 1,269 demands to censor library books and resources with a record of 2,571 unique titles targeted for censorship (American Library Association, 2023). According to ALA, these findings are the “highest number of attempted book bans since the Association began compiling this data more than 20 years ago, and is nearly double the record-breaking 729 challenges reported in 2021” (American Library Association, 2023). Meanwhile, PEN America’s Index of School Book Bans recorded 1,477 instances of individual books banned, affecting 874 unique titles in just the second half of 2022 alone (Friedman, 2023). PEN American even breaks down that most books being targeted by banning revolves around characters that are minority races, identify as LGBTQ+, have mental health issues, or are dealing with serious life events like abuse, grief, or issues with religion (Johnson, 2022). Due to the removal of access to resources that touch on these topics, children are being left at a disadvantage while having their First Amendment rights infringed upon. The rising issue of book banning in schools will continue to violate the First Amendment rights of students in regard to their intellectual freedom, ignore students’ voices thus violating their freedom of speech, and negatively impact their learning and development.

Book banning has always been a contradiction to First Amendment rights, specifically the inherent right to freely express ideas via speech or the press, which are stated in the United States Constitution (King, 2022). Students’ First Amendment rights

are also retained through *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, a decision made by the Supreme Court in 1969, where it is held that students “do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate” (Johnson, 2022). Throughout the years, though, there have been several cases that have fought the banning of books in schools as well as fought for students’ rights. In 1976, the court ruled in favor of students against Strongsville City School District in Ohio when the district’s administration ordered *Catch-22* and *Cat’s Cradle* to be banned and removed from the school library (King, 2022). In this case, the court ruled “by reasoning that the ‘library is a storehouse of knowledge’ and students have a First Amendment right to receive information and the librarian has a right to disseminate it” (King, 2022). While this court case exemplifies the First Amendment rights of access to information for students, it was only the beginning.

In 1975, several members of the Board of Education of the Island Trees Union District entered the high school library and removed nine “objectionable books” from the library’s shelves that were listed on a conservative parent’s group list (Bowers, 1982; Kim, 2022). When word spread of the book removal, it sparked five students to act against the school board, alleging that the board had denied their First Amendment rights (Bowers, 1982). This case became known as *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*, and this case made its way to the Supreme Court. In *Pico*, students in the district argued that the board “impermissibly removed the books not because they lacked educational value but because they offended the board’s social, political, and moral tastes” (Kim, 2022). Justice Brennan, Justice Marshall, and Justice Stevens decided in favor of the students in *Pico*. The Justices held the School

Board's removal of library books as a violation of the students' First Amendment right to receive ideas (Bowers, 1982). It is stated, "Justice Brennan characterized school libraries as 'a place dedicated to quiet, to knowledge, and to beauty' where 'students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding'" (Bowers, 1982). Justice Brennan identified the school library as a hub of resources that should always be accessible to students. He also noted that school boards may not remove books solely on the basis of disliking the ideas within those books (Bowers, 1982; Kim, 2022; King, 2022).

The ideas from Justice Brennan and the case of *Pico* further support ALA's *Library Bill of Rights*, which have been enacted since June 19, 1939, and amended over the years. In the *Library Bill of Rights* are ALA's basic policies that guide library services to affirm that "all libraries are forums for information and ideas" (Library Bill of Rights, 2006). Currently, there are seven policies, where policy two states, "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (Library Bill of Rights, 2006). In addition, policy three states that libraries should challenge censorship issues as it is the responsibility of the library to provide information and enlightenment (Library Bill of Rights, 2006). Overall, ALA supports the foundations of intellectual freedom for each library user with the idea that intellectual freedom "encompasses a respect for the inherent autonomy and dignity of the individual and their right to think independently and form their own ideas and opinions through free and open inquiry" (Caldwell-Stone, 2022).

However, despite these policies and past court cases, book banning organizations continue to form and fight for the removal of literature in schools. Although *Pico* supports the students' First Amendment rights of freedom to access ideas and Justice Brennan supports libraries as a place to access information, further backing ALA's *Library Bill of Rights*, *Pico* was never made into a binding precedent. Thus, schools and courts still have leeway to bypass the First Amendment barrier (Kim, 2022). Permitting these bypasses around First Amendment rights perpetuates the rising problem with book challenges to this day.

Alongside the issue of infringing students' rights to access ideas and information, their freedom of speech, also protected by the First Amendment in the United States Constitution, is disregarded. Although students are often the reason for book banning, they are not the direct cause for them occurring; it is their parents. Parents are often concerned with what their children are exposed to and want to keep certain types of information away from their kids until they feel that the child is mature enough to handle it (Spilka, 2022). What one parent believes is best for his child turns into thinking that it is best for *all* children. This leads to parents attempting to impose restrictions on others in the school setting.

These parents then form groups, such as Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, MassResistance, and others across the nation (Pendharkar, 2022). These groups are national advocacy groups, which means they are larger and work throughout the country, but towns can also have smaller, local groups of parents pushing for books to be banned. All groups, nationwide and local, push for books to be taken off of library shelves and removed from school curriculums across the country (Pendharkar, 2022).

This form of thinking and pushing from groups of parents then leads to the situation where school libraries are “forced to defend learners’ access to diverse ideas and perspectives” (Spilka, 2022). In many of these situations, students’ voices also are not heard. In fact, students feel that their voices are stifled or ignored by parents, who are claiming to advocate for them on their behalf (Spilka, 2022).

Most parents advocate the claim that they want to be able to educate their child on certain ideas, but then the question is raised: *Will they be educated on it?* Kyle King makes an excellent point in his article.

If texts are removed, children and their parents will lose the opportunity ‘to discuss issues and materials they will inevitably be exposed to and also because many children have already been exposed to these difficult situations in their real lives (King, 2022).

If books are removed from access to children in a school setting, they are not able to turn to an adult they trust or their parents to open the conversations themselves on certain topics. Students are also likely to experience difficult situations in their lives before reading a text that pertains to it. King also notes that books “may provide an opportunity for children to explore their own conflicts in relatable characters” (King, 2022). By reading and relating to characters experiencing similar situations, children may learn and adopt manners to cope and understand their own personal experiences and emotions. Being able to access materials on relatable topics can only benefit a child, and the safest place for them to access resources is the school library, where students’ learning is defended.

Students have historically banded together to overturn the ban of novels, like in *Pico* and more recently in York County, Pennsylvania (Spilka, 2022). In 2020, a committee in Central York School District created a list of resources to act as a guide for students and teachers to raise awareness and understanding surrounding the racism and racial turmoil (Cramer, 2021). Sadly, the list's intention was misunderstood, and it became a guideline for materials banned. The claim behind banning the resources came from parents expressing that they feared the materials "could be used to make white children feel guilty about their race or 'indoctrinate' students" (Cramer, 2021). Students in the district learned of these materials being removed and started protesting. They wrote letters to newspapers and news channels, posted online to social media accounts, and created a petition to have the bans overturned (Cramer, 2021). The school board responded by explaining the materials were never to be banned, just considered, and reviewed before continuing to have them circulation (Cramer, 2021). Unfortunately, students are not typically included in discussions about book banning, lack a voice, or have their voices stifled in the fight. While these examples demonstrate students fighting to overturn book bans and succeeding, it is not always a positive outcome. As previously mentioned, PEN America's records for 2022 book bans are extremely high. PEN America notes that 23% of books challenged were successfully banned from school libraries and classrooms, while 52% remain banned but under investigation (Friedman, 2023).

Due to students losing many fights, a significant number of books have been removed from school libraries and curriculums, so students cannot access them. While *Pico's* ruling found that school boards cannot ban or remove information due to

conflicting personal beliefs, it did leave room for limitations, such as removing literature deemed inappropriate from school curriculums. While a school may still offer a novel in its library, they can prevent teachers from teaching a certain literary work and concepts surrounding it.

By removing works of literature from curriculums, teachers also become affected by book bans. Educators are unable to answer questions or share information about topics that have been banned due to states laws revolving banning of content (Southall, 2022). Educators that violate these laws can face serious consequences like paying fines or losing their teaching licenses (Southall, 2022). School districts can even face a loss of funding or have their own additional fines in situations where teachers violate state laws of banned discussions and content (Southall, 2022). While teachers can face serious consequences and face deficits in educational materials, the biggest detriment is to students' learning and their development. Additionally, parents worry over content that is taught or accessible to students in school libraries with great panic that it will alter children. A study done by Christopher J. Ferguson from Stetson University explores the issues of banned book impacting young readers and their behaviors and well-being.

Ferguson conducted a study in 2014 where he surveyed 282 participants from South Texas (Ferguson, 2014). His participants ranged in age from 12 to 18 years-old with a greater frequency of 18-year-olds (about 25% of the sample) participating (Ferguson, 2014). He also found that the majority of his sample were Hispanic in ethnicity (96.8%) and that the sample held slightly more females (61%) than males (39%) (Ferguson, 2014). Ferguson's sample was a "general sample, not an at-risk

sample” and the participants were “recruited through nominations by community members” (Ferguson, 2014).

For his study, Ferguson interviewed his participants by “asking if they had read any of a list of the 30 books identified by the American Library Association (ALA) as a commonly challenged book over the past decade because of content” (Ferguson, 2014). His questionnaire did not identify the books as challenged or banned to the participants; he simply asked if they had read them or not. Alongside interviewing the young adults, Ferguson also interview the children’s families, specifically their parents/guardians, to gauge an insight to the kids’ behaviors from the perspectives of adults closest to them (Ferguson, 2014).

Ferguson’s study found that reading banned books increased children’s civic behavior, especially among older children. Banned books furthered their interest in politics and elections as well as involvement in charitable causes. It did not increase their interest or want to volunteer in the community (Ferguson, 2014). Reading banned books had no strong correlation between GPA, nonviolent crime commission, or violent crime commission. Regarding mental health, it was found that those who had predispositions to mental health issues were only slightly impacted by reading banned books. They found that banned books along with gender affected externalizing or internalizing symptoms of mental health issues with girls tending to internalize their problems and boys externalizing their problems (Ferguson, 2014).

While Ferguson’s study provides plenty of insights into banned books affecting development and behaviors of children, the study does have gaps and some inconclusive results. It is a great steppingstone to see that books that are commonly

banned are not something to fear or fight as they do not greatly impact children in a hurtful way. Instead, not allowing them access to banned books and banned information can cause a great deficit to their learning as they will not be exposed to differing backgrounds, viewpoints, and reading levels. David Lenihan speculates and provides explanations as to how denying students access to banned books makes them severely unequipped to further their education or entire the workforce.

Educator and business owner, David Lenihan, points out that states where “confining educational policies are enforced” are more likely to see AP courses disappear as higher-level courses materials are continuing to be deemed “objectionable” (Lenihan, 2023). Lenihan states, “The absence of these advanced educational options will create insurmountable hurdles for ambitious youngsters” (Lenihan, 2023). Lenihan goes on to explain in his article that students who are not given access to materials with differing perspectives are set-up for “debilitating disappointments” (Lenihan, 2023). He explains a disappoint that students will be impacted by is not being properly prepared for undergraduate or graduate programs where they will have to collaborate, critically think, and be exposed to perspectives that are unfamiliar to their own. Lenihan states, “[Banning books] will deprive [students] of the skills that are needed to cite arguments, demonstrable facts, and empirical evidence to validate their points of view” (Lenihan, 2023). He also believes another debilitation revolves around children not being equipped for the workforce as they will be unable to properly consider differing viewpoints from colleagues or customers (Lenihan, 2023). Ultimately, Lenihan’s thoughts further support that removing certain novels from curriculum and limiting the content taught within classrooms will only negatively impact

students' abilities in school as well as see school programs wither away to conform to parents' wants. Not providing students access to materials that touch on differing lifestyles and cultures further impedes their understanding on other real-world issues, their identities, and even erases populations of students in a school community.

It was previously mentioned the range of topics that are targeted by book bans, but the category that is targeted the most with 41% of unique titles being challenged/banned is LGBTQ+ literature (Johnson, 2022). As of 2022, "more than seven state legislatures are currently debating limiting materials reflecting LGBTQ people" (O'Loughlin, 2022). Legislatures are debating removing or limiting LGBTQ+ content due to concerns about children's innocence and protecting it. The problem with these concerns is that they are equating children's innocence with "non-sexuality and sexual ignorance" while also presuming that children are "naturally heterosexual" (O'Loughlin, 2022). According to a survey from 2022, "approximately 64.8% of students reported that they did not have access to LGBTQ+ information in their school library, computers, or textbooks" (Southall, 2022). Not allowing kids to read about LGBTQ+ individuals and issues only further hurts their understanding of their own identities as well as increases feelings of uneasiness for students who identify in the community at school, negatively impacting their development within a school system.

Removing and preventing learning about the LGBTQ+ community further contributes to other issues that impact members of its community, such as members contracting sexually-transmitted diseases, higher rates of sexual violence, and higher rates of HIV transmitted (Southall, 2022). All of these only further harms children who are growing up and learning more about their identities because they are unable to have

discussions or read about content that could be helpful to them as their resources are removed from their access at school. By removing content that pertains to the LGBTQ+ lifestyle, a whole population of students will feel erased and neglected. Removing an entire group of the population from shelves will further increase biased perspectives and understandings of others, which as Lenihan shared, will only create deficits in students for discussions and analyses of the world. Not discussing the issues that LGBTQ+ members experience negatively impacts the lifestyle and health of students who identify as gay, transgender, or queer as mentioned by Southall. Banning content of any population of people violates students' rights to access ideas and information, and it violates ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* as policy one explains that all libraries' resources, including books, should be available to all users in the community and not exclude materials because of origin, background, or views (Library Bill of Rights, 2006).

Ultimately, the battle behind banned books does not come from students; it comes from parents who are pushing their own beliefs on to everyone else and silencing the voices of children. Their concerns about serious content and wanting to censor their child from it impedes the rights of students, who have the right to access information, the right to speak up and protest against book bans, and who have the right to an education that prepares them for their future. Students deserve to have a choice in what they read without judgment, which is supported by ALA and its policies. Libraries are the spaces that provide materials that students and adults can use to open conversations to discuss various ideas and ways of life. Libraries are responsible for allowing students to come as they are, inquire and research, and gain new understanding on differing perspectives. It is time for society to stop fearing and

censoring books since they are not negatively impacting students whereas censorship is.

References

American Library Association. (2023, May). Book Challenges Nearly Doubled in 2022. *American Libraries*, p. 9.

ALA's magazine, *American Libraries*, offers many interesting articles about issues within American libraries. This small blurb in their magazine provided lots of informative facts behind the amount of books challenged and banned within 2022. The downfall is that the article is very short, so it would benefit from adding more information to it.

Combined with information from PEN America's website, it helps create a full understanding of the statistics behind the issue of banned books in schools.

Bowers, K. (1982). Banning books in public schools: Board of Education v. Pico. *Pepp. L. Rev.*, 10, 545.

This article covers the incident that led to the court case of *Board of Education v. Pico*. It provides background information regarding the School Board members entering the high school's library and removing several books from their shelves. It explains which books were removed, what happened to them after this event, and how a group of high school students filed action against the School Board with focus on their First Amendment rights. This source is helpful as it provides the entire court case experience and results with an unbiased view.

Caldwell-Stone, D. (2022). Intellectual Freedom. In S. Hirsh, *Information Services Today: An Introduction* (pp. 471-482). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

This chapter from the textbook is very useful to gather a better understanding of Intellectual Freedom as well as one's rights to information. This chapter looks at these rights in various library settings, so it is not focused on just school libraries. While this chapter is helpful, it could use more information on rights in school library settings.

Cramer, I. G. (2021, October 2). *How Students Fought a Book Ban and Won, for Now*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/02/us/york-pennsylvania-school-books.html>

This article from The New York Times portrays and discusses the York County School District's book banning from 2020. The article provides a timeline of events that occurred to cause the massive misunderstanding of a list of resources that were to be used to aide students and teachers on the topic of racial inequality. It discusses how students fought to prevent the materials from being removed in their school libraries and curriculums. While not a peer-reviewed article, this is an excellent source that displays objectivity on its content.

Ferguson, C. J. (2014). Is reading “banned” books associated with behavior problems in young readers? The influence of controversial young adult books on the psychological well being of adolescents. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 8(3), 354.

This article was very interesting in that it takes a scientific approach to looking at popular banned books and their effects on children aged 12-18. The study breaks down the survey conducted with results to analyze which banned books were read and how young

readers behaved due to reading them. Parents were also surveyed to analyze behavior of their children. Results found that reading banned books reduced mental health issues for the readers, especially feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress. While this article investigates a claim made by many opposers, the study could have been conducted with more depth behind it when looking at various ages, genders, etc.

Friedman, K. M. (2023, April 23). *Banned in the USA: State Laws Supercharge Book Suppression in School*. Retrieved from PEN America: <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/#:~:text=and%20New%20Titles-,During%20the%20first%20half%20of%20the%202022%2D2023%20school%20year,the%202021%2D2022%20school%20year.>

PEN America's website provides numerous articles regarding issues within libraries, including a strong focus on school libraries. The website also focuses strongly on issues behind banned books and what groups of people are targeted in the bans. Friedman's article provides a quick breakdown of key findings for the 2022 school year about book bans. This article also provides a definition of what a book ban is as well as a glance of the multiple types of books that face challenges.

Kim, R. (2022). Under The Law: Banning books: Unlawful censorship, or within a school's discretion?. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 103(7), 62-64.

Robert Kim's article provides a nice summary of the *Pico* case from 1982. It also provides areas where the case was weakened and probes the reader with further questions to

consider in regard to the case and censorship issues. This article is useful to consider these questions and provide possible approaches to resolving them. Kim's article combined with information from the Bowers resource provides great clarity on Justice Brennan's stance from the *Pico* case in 1982.

King, K. (2022). The Dilemma of Banned Books: Questioning the Ethics of Censoring Literature in Schools.

Kyle King's article dives into the issues behind censoring books from public school libraries, and the effects it has on students' learning and development. The article briefly mentions *Board of Education v. Pico* to provide some background on the law protecting students' First Amendment rights. It then looks at how advocacy groups still fight to have books that contain "edgy" content removed to reduce access for adolescents. This article is helpful in that it considers students' perspectives to reading banned books and the great impact they feel from seeing characters like them on the page.

Johnson, J. F. (2022, September 19). *Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in School*. Retrieved from PEN America: <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>

PEN America's website provides numerous articles regarding issues within libraries, including a strong focus on school libraries. The website also focuses strongly on issues behind banned books and what groups of people are targeted in the bans. Friedman and Johnson's article provides plenty of information and statistics for the 2022 school year

book bans. This article also provides an understanding of students' First Amendment rights from previous court cases.

Lenihan, D. (2023, April 24). The Consequences of Book Bans. *Publisher's Weekly*, p. 96.

Lenihan's periodical article sheds light on learning and development issues of students who lose access to banned books and banned teaching content. He speculates that advanced courses will disappear in time as content that is taught for those levels will no longer be allowed to be taught or discussed. He shares that students will not be properly prepared for college or the workforce as they will be limited in understanding of people from differing backgrounds from themselves. Lenihan gives many interesting thoughts on issues that could affect students as a former educator and businessman, but his thoughts could use more strength from data.

Library Bill of Rights. (2006, June 30). Retrieved from American Library Association:

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>

ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* provides excellent insight into the guidelines that support librarians and their library policies. This document clearly states the seven policies that professionals are expected to uphold in their positions and organizations. These policies clearly state and support people's First Amendment rights to access information as well as explains that librarians should fight censorship.

O'Loughlin, C., Schmidt, T., & Glazier, J. (2022). 'It's just filth:' Banned books and the project of

queer erasure. *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*, 17(3), 7.

This source provided an abundance of information on how most books are challenged or banned for their “sexual” content, especially if it pertains to any LGBTQ+ issues or represents an LGBTQ+ character. O’Loughlin provides information that shows how book banning targets the queer community through wiping out novels of great importance to queer identities and representation. This article explores how LGBTQ+ literature has been deemed “obscene” or linked to child pornography by extremists. The article is useful to see how groups approach attacking novels based around or about the LGBTQ+ culture as well as why it is harmful to students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.

Pendharkar, E. (2022, September 28). *Who's Behind the Escalating Push to Ban Books? A New Report Has Answers*. Retrieved from Education Week:

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/whos-behind-the-escalating-push-to-ban-books-a-new-report-has-answers/2022/09>

Pendharkar's article for Education Week explains who is behind the push for banned books. The article explains several groups that are formed by parents and how they create pressure on government politicians and school boards to have books removed from school libraries and curriculums. While this article is great for identifying national advocacy groups that are creating problems with banned books, it does pull a lot of information from PEN America, which has also been used as a source for this essay.

Southall, A. (2022). *Censorship is Ruining America's Education*. San Francisco: Institute for Youth in Policy.

This source was excellent for exploring problems that both students and teachers are experiencing with book bans. It discusses the issues behind laws impeding freedom of speech for educators with creating curriculums and not being able to teach certain content. It also provides information on students who are greatly impacted from not having access to certain information, specifically how it isolates children from having conversations with adults about certain topics. The downfall with this source is that it claims to look at censorship impacting education in a general sense, but a lot of the information pertained mostly to LGBTQ+ students as they are the ones mostly targeted from book bans.

Spilka, J. (2022, May). 377 Book Challenges Tracked by ALA in 2019 -- And the Problem is Growing. *Knowledge Quest*, pp. 31-33.

Spilka's article plainly states that the driving force behind book bans come from parents. He explains that students feel their voices ignored or stifled under the major push from parent advocacy groups, thus infringing their freedom of speech. He also provides examples of students overturning book bans as they do not agree with school administrators or parents removing certain works from their school libraries. This article was very helpful when looking at the ethical issues behind freedom of speech.