

# Students lose access to books amid ‘state-sponsored purging of ideas’

Measures across the country aim to restrict what children can read.

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In one Virginia school district this fall, parents will receive an email notification every time their child checks out a book. In a Florida school system, teachers are purging their classrooms of texts that mention racism, sexism, gender identity or oppression. And a Pennsylvania school district is convening a panel of adults to sign off on every title that school librarians propose buying.

The start of the 2022-2023 school year will usher in a new era of education in some parts of America — one in which school librarians have less freedom to choose books and schoolchildren less ability to read books they find intriguing, experts say.

In the past two years, six states have passed laws that mandate parental involvement in reviewing books, making it easier for parents to remove books or restrict the texts available at school, according to a tally kept by nonprofit EveryLibrary. Five states are considering similar legislation. Typical of these is an Arizona bill, signed by Gov. Doug Ducey (R) in April, that requires districts to send parents who ask lists of the books their children check out, as well as to publish the titles of all library materials bought after Jan. 1. Policies are proliferating at the district level, too: One Nebraska system will require that parents sign permission slips for library books. A Texas system will divide its library into “juvenile,” “young adult” and “adult” sections, with parents choosing the “level” their child can access.

“This is a state-sponsored purging of ideas and identities that has no precedent in the United States of America,” said John Chrastka, EveryLibrary’s executive director. “We’re witnessing the silencing of stories and the suppressing of information [that will make] the next generation less able to function in society.”

No one is tracking how many districts have adopted such rules. But Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, said she has never seen such a strong, successful movement to limit the ability to read. She warned of lasting consequences for the current generation of students — especially given that school libraries are often the “only source of vetted, reliable information” on topics such as health care.

“This shows an inability to respect the rights of individual students, particularly older students,” she said. “It’s treating them like 5-year-olds, which is not the most helpful or useful thing we could be doing, and is in fact teaching lessons in censorship.”

Mounting book challenges, bans and clandestine removals, all of which reached historic highs during the past school year, are also eroding students’ freedom to read. Simultaneously, Republican legislators in at least nine states are pushing laws that force school library databases to block certain content. Everywhere, the books targeted are mostly written by and about people of color and LGBTQ individuals, according to analyses conducted by the American Library Association and PEN America.

Parents and students are stepping into the fray. Some are fighting to increase schoolchildren’s access to literature with book clubs and giveaways, while others are spreading awareness of texts they believe are inappropriate. Emily Maikisch, a mother in Florida, this year launched a book reviewing website, BookLooks.org, aimed at “parents who want to make ... content-based decisions for their child,” she said.

The sharp increase in oversight and control of children’s reading at school is welcomed by some parents, conservative pundits and lawmakers who argue that unsupervised students will stumble across texts that expose them to sexual topics too early or that undermine their family’s beliefs and values. Library advocates say that existing book challenge procedures, as well as the expertise of credentialed school librarians, were already sufficient to ensure school book collections remain appropriate.

The spike in regulation of school reading has some educators reconsidering the profession, amid a catastrophic national teacher shortage. Among them is Cassandra Oetinger-Kenski, a third-grade teacher in Florida’s Palm Beach County. Oetinger-Kenski was recently told to yank any books from her classroom that are not “in compliance” with new state laws circumscribing instruction on race, racism, gender and LGBTQ issues.

Oetinger-Kenski, who is married to a woman, does not want to hide books that feature families like hers. As the school year begins, she has decided not to comply.

“I have books in my library that talk about all kinds of family makeups, two moms, two dads, one dad and a grandma, you name it,” Oetinger-Kenski said. “I am not removing them.”

If pressured, she said, “I would strongly consider leaving.”

## **‘Books they would have read are gone’**

In July, the school board of Central Bucks County, Pa., voted 6-3 to overhaul the way its librarians do their jobs.

Under a new five-page policy, book purchases must be approved by a vaguely defined set of administrators, possibly including the superintendent, with input from “parents and community members.” The policy prohibits any materials that contain “sexual acts” (or “nudity” at the elementary and middle-school levels); requires libraries to publish inventories; makes it easier for parents to remove books; and asserts parents can, at any time, receive a list of books their children have checked out.

The document concludes: “While librarians are trained in selecting materials ... the ultimate determination of appropriateness for a minor lies with the parent.”

Before the vote, the proposed policy drew protests and complaints from the local NAACP and the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. Carolyn Foote, a former Texas librarian and co-founder of the group FReadom Fighters, wrote a letter to the board warning that the policy would lead to censorship regulated only by the prejudices of untrained administrators.

“When we put the decision-making solely in the hands of one person like a superintendent who is not involved typically in the landscape of understanding what’s in school libraries ... it leads to unnecessary restrictions of content,” Foote said in an interview. “Right now there is a lot of focus on LGBTQ-type characters and content or books that might talk about race ... You’re restricting certain topics from students [and that creates] an implication that there’s something wrong with this content.”

But after the vote, Central Bucks superintendent Abram Lucabaugh — who did not respond to a request for comment — defended the policy, telling a local reporter it “seeks to identify things that are age-inappropriate.”

Katherine Semisch, a 62-year-old former English teacher in Central Bucks, disagrees.

“I think the intent of the policy is to frighten teachers and librarians into a very high degree of self-censorship, and it will work beautifully,” she said, adding that ex-colleagues of hers are already boxing up their classroom libraries. “Kids will find that topics they might have discussed in another year in school will be squashed. Books they would have read are gone.”

Setups like the one in Central Bucks, which privilege parental and administrative preferences over librarians’ know-how and students’ interests, contravene proven methods schools have long used to select books, said Caldwell-Stone of the American Library Association.

For decades, she said, most schools relied on librarians — who in many states earn master’s degrees — to select the books they believed would supplement classroom lessons and foster a love of reading. Librarians in turn relied on book reviews and maturity rating websites such as Common Sense Media.

Not anymore. The Central Bucks policy is nearly identical to book selection guidelines published by the Texas Education Agency in April, versions of which have been implemented by at least two districts there. In the past month, policies giving parents power to help determine which books appear in libraries were adopted for all Utah schools, in Massachusetts’ Haverhill Schools and in Tennessee’s Hamilton County schools.

In Florida, the Flagler County district debuted a three-tiered library system this past spring.

The first level grants students access to the entire library. At level two, parents can specify up to five titles their children cannot check out. At level three, children have no access to books except titles specified by their parents.

“We saw what was happening within our district, in our state, and across the country,” said LaShakia Moore, Flagler’s director of teaching and learning. “What we were hearing was ‘Choice.’ Parents wanted to decide for their children.”

Another increasingly popular tactic is to require parental sign-off before librarians hand books to children. One of the districts doing so is Virginia’s Bedford County Public Schools, which has debuted a book-lending system that emails parents every time their child checks out a book. For the first time, the district is also requiring parents to sign a document at the start of the school year formally indicating approval of their child’s curriculum. Parents can request that any book be made unavailable to children.

Amy Snead, a mother of four and chair of the Bedford County chapter of parental rights group Moms for Liberty, said her organization pushed for the books policy. She said it will prevent children from encountering sexually explicit material.

“Parents throughout the county are really pleased,” Snead said.

But Lily Van Bergen, 18, who graduated from the Bedford system this spring, is worried. She said her hometown is largely White, Christian and conservative. She predicted parental supervision of reading will shrink students’ understanding of the world.

“Parents are going to see these emails and say, ‘Oh, well, my child is checking this out and I don’t like that,’ ” Van Bergen said. “It’s going to be harder and harder to escape the beliefs you were taught when you were growing up.”

And in Central Bucks, Alexandra Coffey, a rising high school junior, is likewise feeling anxious. Coffey, 16, has “always been obsessed” with reading, she said, once skipping a day of third grade to finish an 800-page Harry Potter novel.

When she heard about her district’s new book selection policy, she was flooded with the same rage she felt as a little girl whenever she saw a book that had been mishandled, its spine bent or pages torn.

“All that came rushing back to me,” Coffey said. “It’s wrong. What they’re trying to do.”

## **‘We consider this our ministry’**

As states and districts adjust their reading rules, parents and students are working to change things, too. Teens in Texas, for example, have formed “banned book clubs” — while in Missouri, students are suing their district to restore eight pulled books.

Meanwhile, a flurry of parent-staffed websites reviewing books for inappropriate content have appeared — including “Between the Book Covers,” whose website says “professional review sites cannot be entrusted,” and [BookLook.info](#), “a place for taking a closer look at the books in our children’s hands.” (Virginia’s Bedford County district now suggests the latter as a resource for parents.) There are also [Facebook groups](#) like Utah’s “LaVerna in the Library,” which “collects naughty children’s books.”

Maikisch, her husband and a group of families in Florida’s Brevard County launched [BookLooks.org](#) this March. The site promises to find “objectionable content ... in your child’s book before they do.” Parents volunteer their time to review titles for BookLooks, Maikisch wrote in an email, judging texts by “things in the traditional obscenity spectrum (sex, drugs use, violence, etc.).”

BookLooks ratings range from 0, “For Everyone,” to 5: “Aberrant Content” for “Adult only.” A BookLooks review of Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison’s novel “The Bluest Eye,” often taught at the high school level, labeled it a “4” — meaning it should not be read by anyone under 18.

“This book contains profanity and derogatory terms; sexual activities including sexual assault and molestation; alcohol use; inflammatory racial and religious commentary,” the eight-page review concludes.

To date, BookLooks has reviewed more than 260 books. The group relies on word of mouth to promote its work, Maikisch wrote, although it is in contact with “parents and groups in several states.”

“Our goal would be for when one parent asks another if they’ve heard of a particular book, they’d be told they could probably look it up on our site,” Maikisch wrote. “We consider this our ministry and calling.”

Elsewhere in Florida, two mothers have taken the opposite tack.

Jen Cousins and Stephana Ferrell, both of Orange County, are purchasing books that feature diverse lifestyles and distributing them to school librarians free. They launched the [Florida Freedom to Read Project](#) after an Orange County school board demanded last year that the book “Gender Queer,” a memoir, be removed from schools.

“I was thinking, “That’s not okay. You can’t do that,”” said Cousins, who has four children in Orange schools, including one who identifies as nonbinary.

The women worked with media specialists from the Orange and Osceola districts to assemble a list of titles. Using donations from supporters, they have collected 1,000 books and handed out roughly 500 at giveaways in public spots. They are planning ways to deliver the rest.

In other places, book purges are proceeding quietly — sometimes by unwilling hands.

This winter, a 16-year-old in Florida’s Broward County stepped into his school library to find the librarian looking a little ashamed.

The 16-year-old, who is transgender and spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation, loves to read — especially books that feature LGBTQ characters, because they give him hope for a happy life. He volunteers in his school library every week, restocking shelves, thrilling in the feel and smell of the pages.

But on that winter day, the librarian pulled him over to the computer screen. Awaiting was an email from administrators mandating the removal of about two dozen books featuring LGBTQ people for “sensitive content.”

The Broward school district did not respond to a list of questions about the incident.

The student carried the books to a backroom. He placed them beside titles pulled for graphic images of the Holocaust. He felt sick.

“It was really hard for me to believe at the time that LGBTQ life, my life, could be compared to something like genocide,” he said. “Now it just hurts. A lot.”