

THE Political Librarian

EVERYLIBRARY ■ INSTITUTE

Volume 7 Issue 1

The Political Librarian

ISSN 2471-3155

The Political Librarian is published biannually by the EveryLibrary Institute NFP, a public and tax policy non-profit for libraries. The Political Librarian is dedicated to expanding the discussion of, promoting research on, and helping to re-envision locally focused advocacy, policy, and funding issues for libraries.

Series Editor: ANDREW T. SULAVIK, MLIS, ThD

Editorial Support: MARTHA McGEHEE, MLIS

Editorial Support: SANOBAR CHAGANI, MLIS

The Political Librarian Editorial Board

CHRIS BROWN, MLIS, MPA

Library Commissioner for the Chicago Public Library, Chicago, IL

ANTHONY CHOW, Ph.D.

Director of San Jose State University iSchool, San Jose, CA

NICOLE COOKE, MLIS, M.Ed., Ph.D.

Augusta Baker Endowed Chair at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC

ROSE T. DAWSON, MLS, CPM

Executive Director of the Alexandria Library, Alexandria, VA

EWA DZIEDZIC ELLIOTT, MLIS

Education Librarian at the R. Barbara Gitenstein Library at The College of New Jersey, Ewing Township, NJ

CHRISTOPHER HARRIS, EdD.

Director of the School Library System for the Genesee Valley BOCES, Genesee County, NY

JONATHAN HARRIS, MLIS

Director of the Portage County District Library, Garrettsville, OH

SLAVEN LEE, MLIS

Director of the Missoula Public Library, Missoula, MT

NOAH LENSTRA, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Library and Information Science at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC

The EveryLibrary Institute would like to thank the Open Scholarship initiative at Washington University of St. Louis Libraries for hosting The Political Librarian. Previous issues are accessible via <http://thepoliticallibrarian.org>.

Correspondence: Please address all editorial correspondence to The Political Librarian's series editor, Andrew Sulavik, email: atsulavik@yahoo.com. Any correspondence specific to EveryLibrary Institute and its work should be sent to executive director, John Chrastka, email: john.chrastka@everylibrary.org.

Permissions: Articles may be copied or otherwise reused without permission only to the extent permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the US Copyright Law. Permission to copy or reproduce articles for private study, scholarship, research, classroom, or library is allowed under Fair Use.

The Political Librarian

Vol. 7.1

Spring 2024

CONTENTS

This Issue	i
“I Don’t Fit Into Your Neat Little Plan”: Defending Queer Youth From the Censorship Crusade Ronald Padrón	1
The Demographics of Book Bans	18
Reflections and Advice on Running an Informational Millage Campaign Anonymous	43
Book Banning and Censorship Are Only Symptoms: Lessons Learned from Personal History Ewa Dziedzic-Elliott	49

This Issue

Of late, librarians appear to have become more distrusted than understood. This gathering distrust stems from both our commitment to inclusion and our arcane (at least to the uninitiated public) process of selecting materials. We assume the solemn mandate to make practical and theoretical knowledge freely accessible to *everyone* in order to promote the common good for a healthy democracy. This duty is entrusted to a professionally trained corps of information specialists representing a vast array of independent thought and rationalities as well as philosophical, religious, and political perspectives. To do so means selecting a diverse collection of content. When these strengths within our professional ranks are governed by the principle of value neutrality, the ideal result is a collection based on a wide distribution of knowledge, not on the imposition of ideological sensibility.

Recent cultural shifts have made collection development more tenuous and have exposed a segment within our society that is inimical to free and inquiring minds. Consequently, the process of collection development has been questioned and under attack for some time now. Some in our communities have called to add 'overscers' of collection development to library boards, to cut library budgets, to instigate book challenges, to ban books, and to take the decision-making away from professional librarians and hand it over to politicians. Ultimately, this has led to fractured communities and an erosion of confidence in the library profession and its independent, decision-making policies.

Each of the contributions to this Spring Issue investigate and explore the hobbling effects of the current socio-political climate upon libraries and librarians, caused by wielding political threats of censorship, investigations, book banning, and library budget cuts.

Our first article, "I Don't Fit Into Your Neat Little Plan': Defending Queer Youth From the Censorship Crusade" by Ronald Padrón, discusses the importance of addressing the political right's derision of LGBTQ+ people under the aegis of "parental rights" and "protecting the children." To navigate political and social blowback, some librarians and libraries have been forced to benignly neglect or discretely provide materials about LGBTQ+ history, identity development and sexual health. Padrón argues that librarians can and should facilitate community connection, empathy, and understanding concerning the lived realities of LGBTQ+ people within their local community. He offers a concrete framework for achieving this goal.

Our second piece is a report prepared by The EveryLibrary Institute's research team: "The Demographics of Book Bans". This paper delivers a novel analysis of the demographics and political attitudes of the communities experiencing book bans and challenges. It investigates common demographic characteristics between communities that are experiencing book bans and challenges to intellectual freedom and access to information. Among its numerous arguments, is that Parent's Rights groups and political entities claiming to protect all children from what they see as threats from groups supporting diversity and sex education can be motivated by conditions such as white fragility, white demographic decline (and its associated fear), as well as by intolerance of the LGBTQ lifestyle--both religious and otherwise.

The third piece is an anonymous submission, titled, “Reflections and Advice on Running an Informational Millage Campaign.” The paper documents the excruciating but necessary process of executing, within a hostile environment, a campaign to persuade voters to vote “no” on a county-wide ballot to eliminate or decrease the millage rate that financially supports the library. Our author offers concrete, sage advice on how to navigate this process, stage by stage, and in the end, even adds a dose of hope to those who must pass this way.

The final opinion paper, “Book Banning and Censorship are Only Symptoms: Lessons Learned from Personal History,” penned by Ewa Dziedzic-Elliott, is a cautionary tale, which begins in Poland and comes full circle to the threatening realities we are facing in our libraries in the United States today. The author presents both a personal and historical perspective on banning and censorship, sounding an alarm to the potential greater damage that these movements pose to our society.

Together, these articles serve as a clarion call for librarians to design collections that support the confident pursuit of free inquiry: whatever its source, wherever it leads, whatever the consequences. It is incumbent upon us to resist book bans, external infringements on collection development policies, and ward off frivolous book challenges so that, in the paraphrased words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘citizens--of all ages and races, of all creeds and persuasions--are able to confidently turn to libraries as a space where they can freely seek the whole truth, unvarnished by fashion and uncompromised by expediency’.

Andrew T. Sulavik, MLIS, ThD
Series Editor

“I Don’t Fit Into Your Neat Little Plan”¹: Defending Queer Youth From the Censorship Crusade

RONALD PADRÓN

ABSTRACT

The current attacks on minority representation and visibility are often given cover by claims of “protecting the children.” Too often this excuse goes unchallenged and marginalized youth suffer the consequences. This white paper shows how public libraries, librarians, and the programs that train them can step up to protect part of this forgotten population – LGBTQ+ youth – by: actively positioning themselves as public health partners in combatting negative health outcomes in LGBTQ+ youth, utilizing intergroup frameworks around empathy building to promote social justice in their communities, and actively integrating training to become social justice leaders and advocates into MLS/MLIS curricula.

Protect the Children! As Long As They’re Straight.

In the current socio-political climate, ideas of “parental rights” and “protecting the children” have once again become central talking points on the political right in a renewed American culture war. When I hear these phrases, however, I’m often left wondering which parents are we deferring to? Which children are we protecting? A cursory glance at the legal, social, and cultural landscape makes it easy to see that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) youth are not the children being protected.

In legislative sessions across the United States there are currently 515 anti-LGBTQ+ bills either under consideration or passed into law (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2024)². These bills range from issues related to healthcare, public accommodation, free speech and expression, and information access in school curricula and libraries. Taking into consideration the last several years of increasing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, there are now 11 states that require or promote the outing of transgender youth in school to their families without regard for their safety at home, and 16 states either censor LGBTQ+ issues and information in schools or allow for parents to opt their children out of inclusive curricula (Movement Advancement Project: LGBTQ Curricular Laws, n.d. -a; Movement Advancement Project: Forced Outing of

¹ This is a line from the song “Heterosexuality Is a Construct” by Onsind, a punk band from Pity Me, Durham (UK). I highly recommend checking them out. (Onsind)

² The ACLU’s webpage has an active dashboard tracking anti-LGBTQ bills in the U.S. The link is in the references.

Transgender Students, n.d.-b)³. Public libraries have not been immune from this assault on the LGBTQ+ community either. In March 2024, the American Library Association (ALA) released data on book challenges in 2023, tracking over 1,200 attempts to censor library materials and challenges to nearly over 4,200 titles (ALA, 2024).

This attack on LGBTQ+ representation and inclusion is part of a larger cultural backlash against diversity and acknowledging the existence and lived experiences of marginalized communities more broadly, and erasing stories that run contrary to the predominant conservative American historical narrative. This aggressively resurgent anti-queer animus runs parallel to attacks on Black identity, history, and experience. Emboldened by the reframing of Critical Race Theory into a catch-all progressive boogeyman, works that deal with civil rights and anti-racism are frequent targets for erasure. No better example of this exists than the list of 850 books compiled by a Texas state lawmaker, Rep. Matt Krause (R), composed mostly of books written by and about people of color, LGBTQ+ authors, and other marginalized groups (Chappell, 2021). Rep. Krause's rationale for targeting these books was that they "might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex." It's important to note that only one percent of bans were initiated by students themselves (Bellamy-Walker, 2022).

The Trevor Project, a non-profit focused on ending suicide among LGBTQ+ youth, conducted a survey of over 18,000 individuals between the ages of 13 and 24 who self-identify as LGBTQ+ in 2023, their sixth annual survey tracking mental health in this population (Nath et al., 2024). The results show a community in crisis. From this report we see 38% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the last year, with higher rates among youth of color, and transgender/nonbinary youth. More than one in ten attempted suicide. Ninety percent of respondents indicated recent politics has negatively impacted their well-being, with over half ranking the impact as "a lot." Of those who had access to an affirming space at home, school, a community event, or online, there was a marked decrease in attempting suicide. Additionally, respondents ranked school (52%) and online (68%) higher than home (40%) as an affirming space.

Given the information from the mental health survey, one would assume any initiative supposedly centering the protection of children would work toward supporting LGBTQ+ youth by providing them with access to the resources, support, and information they need in order to survive. This includes increasing access to affirming spaces, access to resources so they can better understand themselves and make healthy choices, and seeing themselves reflected as part of the community. This assumption supposes those waving the standard of protecting children are engaging in good faith, something easily disproved by their own words. For example, speaking with the conservative Christian organization Family Policy Alliance, Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) stated a major priority for conservatives should be "protecting minor children from the transgender [sic] in this culture and that influence" (Sprayregen, 2023). Senator Blackburn's statement was in reference to a bill currently under consideration at the federal level, the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA); a bill many LGBTQ+ advocates worry would further erase queer identity and community online. This is just one example where allowing queer people to exist in a space, this time on social media, is met with accusations of "indoctrination," and any defense of queer people's right to inhabit these spaces is met with being labeled a "groomer".

³ Movement Advancement Project has several active dashboards tracking state-level policy impacts on the LGBTQ+ community. Relevant links can be found in the references.

It is within this context that public libraries must step up in order to protect LGBTQ+ youth. I believe there are three key ways in which this can be accomplished:

1. Acknowledge access to LGBTQ+ materials and representation is an issue of public health, health justice, and health information access.
2. Develop programming focused on social justice and building empathy utilizing intergroup frameworks.
3. Fill the gaps in MLS/MLIS curricula to better prepare public librarians to become social justice change agents.

The remainder of this white paper will address these three topics individually, beginning with the public health argument against LGBTQ+ censorship. This is a complex approach that requires addressing the history of censorship of LGBTQ+ health or community material, the correlation of information access with positive health outcomes, social connectedness and mental health, LGBTQ+ health education and health literacy for family and allies, and the unique needs of the transgender community.

LGBTQ+ Censorship as a Public Health Issue Impacting Queer Youth

The majority of the American voting public is already against book banning and only a third are in favor of banning books due to topics concerning sexuality (EveryLibrary Institute, 2023). Public libraries and librarians, already under-resourced and with precious little extra time and energy, should focus their efforts not on point-by-point refutations of outlandish interpretations of their collections, but instead publicly situate themselves as an active player in public health initiatives serving the LGBTQ+ community. They would be better served by positioning their inclusion of LGBTQ+ materials and programming, and collaborations with local queer community organizations, as centered on health information justice and human rights in the service of protecting LGBTQ+ youth who are at greater risk of negative mental, physical, and sexual health outcomes than their heterosexual peers.

One of the biggest challenges in positioning the public library as a key player in meeting the public health needs of the LGBTQ+ community is expanding the general notion of what constitutes public health and health interventions. On the immediate heels of the COVID pandemic many people may equate the idea of “public health” with things they can tie to traditional markers of the health field - medical research, vaccinations, etc. The general public may not make the connection that information access plays a vital role in individual and community health, and they may struggle to understand how access to non-health related materials can be related to health outcomes. For example, research has shown that positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in fiction can reduce feelings of isolation (Alexander & Miselis, 2007). Helping to ensure access to this type of representation is just one way public libraries contribute to more positive mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.

Many of the major arguments made by those in favor of the erasure of LGBTQ+ identity and the censorship of vital and affirming resources is that this material is “indecent” or “obscene”. These arguments assert queer identity is inherently adult, sexual, pornographic, and otherwise unsuitable for minors. To those involved in LGBTQ+ advocacy this seems all too familiar. The benefit of the lack of creativity and new material on the part of the book banners, however, means we can look back at the long history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement for examples on how to combat this narrative. (It should not be overlooked that this is precisely

why book banners want to eradicate access to this history and information, so that we can't collectively build on the successes of those who came before us.)

The 1997 ruling in *Reno v. ACLU* struck down the Communications Decency Act (CDA) as unconstitutional. The majority opinion ruled the CDA violated the First Amendment and that "the interest in encouraging freedom of expression in a democratic society outweighs any theoretical but unproven benefit of censorship" (Stevens et al., 1996). It also makes an amazing comparison of the World Wide Web to both a vast library and sprawling mall. The ruling also directly references the work of the Critical Path AIDS Project, an HIV/AIDS education and community support project founded by LGBTQ+ activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya. What began as a newsletter to provide information on HIV/AIDS to the queer community grew to become an advocacy and information website as well as an Internet Service Provider to the HIV-positive community in Philadelphia (Lubin & Vaccaro, 2020). Kuromiya was one of the first twenty plaintiffs to file a suit challenging the constitutionality of the CDA, recognizing the impact this law would have on the distribution of queer-centered and sexually explicit information about HIV/AIDS prevention given its vague policing of "indecent" and "obscene" material.

Shortly following this ruling similar legislation allowing for the restriction of information access on the internet passed at the federal level with the purported intention of protecting children, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA). One of the most insidious aspects of legislation such as CIPA is the way its negative impacts fall on those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities given its connection to federal programs such as grants and E-rate discounts, which are more likely to service patrons at the crossroads of compounding oppressions. Studies have found that the implementation of blocking and filtering software has a disparate impact on sexual minority youth as the information they are more likely to be seeking on sexual identity and safer sex practices is at higher risk of being labeled as "pornographic", depriving them of equal access to health information (Holt, 2006). Additionally, others have recognized the negative impact filters have on the ability for LGBTQ+ youth to find community and access information that leads to a reduction in negative health outcomes (risky sexual behavior, depression, self-harm, suicide, etc.) and recommend libraries meet the minimal levels of compliance for CIPA and develop practices for ensuring information on gender identity, sexual identity, and sexual health remain accessible to teen and adult patrons (Holt, 2009; Jardine, 2013).

The attacks on LGBTQ+ expression and information today are similarly vague, relying on the emotive power of rhetoric by accusing libraries and schools of providing "pornography" to children, "grooming" them, and "indoctrinating" them into a homosexual agenda. Excerpts from books are provided with absolutely no context, deceptively seeking to muddy the waters and somehow compare adult memoirs to the story of a penguin with two dads. This type of censorship also carries with it the same dangers Kuromiya foresaw with the passage of the CDA in advancing tangible harm to the health and safety of the LGBTQ+ community through lack of access to information to promote better health outcomes.

It is fair to say there is a mental health crisis among LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to higher rates of suicidality, 50% of queer youth who want access to mental health care are unable to receive it, and among the 13–17-year-old respondents, 67% reported symptoms of anxiety and 57% reported symptoms of depression (Nath et al., 2024). Public libraries can serve a vital role in addressing this issue by working to provide access to affirming physical and online spaces, access to information resources that allow LGBTQ+ youth the ability to learn more about themselves, and provide education and training to those who care about this population to be better equipped in providing support.

There exists a “grand narrative” among LGBTQ+-identified librarians that “libraries save [LGBTQ+] lives”, which was interrogated in a 2016 study by Rachel S. Wexelbaum. The qualitative data provides numerous examples of the lifeline provided by school and public libraries during the K-12 experience. One particularly powerful example describes access to LGBTQ+ books and history as a “light at the end of the tunnel” and an “assurance that the light wasn’t an oncoming train, but a way out” (Wexelbaum, 2016 pp.42). While this study specifically looked at the role of libraries in retaining LGBTQ+ students in a higher education setting, the ways in which libraries and librarians meet the needs of those students is easily translatable to serving the LGBTQ+ community writ large in an effort to combat the types of systemic barriers and intersecting oppressions that lead to statistically higher negative health outcomes (Adelson et al., 2021, pp. 804).

In addition to ensuring minimum standard compliance with federal barriers to health information such as CIPA, public libraries should appoint a liaison who works with local LGBTQ+ community groups, student groups, etc. to better understand the health information needs of the community and facilitate access to literature, government agencies or non-profits, or other resources. Ensuring health education and community service resource brochures are readily and discreetly available can also support LGBTQ+ youth, who do not feel comfortable either disclosing their queer identity or asking for assistance in researching a health need. Many libraries are already providing this type of support, even in states that are traditionally considered hostile to the queer community. Bharat Mehra and Baheya S. Jaber recently investigated how public libraries in Alabama are serving their local LGBTQ+ communities (Mehra & Jaber, 2023). They found several examples of how public libraries are serving the 53,000 LGBTQ+ students who are 15+ by providing free LibGuides on community resources for children and teens, facilitating connections to LGBTQ+ organizations, and leveraging the interlibrary loan system across the state. Resources and services like this should be broadly replicated across all public libraries.

Having an online presence, whether a website or social media outlet, that provides LGBTQ+ affirming content can also help to increase engagement with queer youth and make them more likely to feel safe engaging with library resources and services. Fostering this type of trust is incredibly important given many LGBTQ+ youth do not receive adequate health information in schools and so tend to rely on their peers, who often provide inaccurate information, or the Internet, which is awash in misinformation (Jia et al., 2021). Public libraries should also foster greater self-efficacy in queer youth and help prevent negative health outcomes by offering programming that teaches greater information literacy skills when seeking health information online.

Public libraries should also engage the friends and family of LGBTQ+ youth in working to combat negative health outcomes or risky health behaviors. A study published in 2018 in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* focused on the sexual health communication between parents and their LGBTQ+ adolescent children (Newcomb et al., 2018). In the study a third of parent participants reported feeling unequipped to talk to their LGBTQ+ children about sex and dating due to lack of understanding. The inability for LGBTQ+ youth to receive accurate sexual health information from trusted sources can lead to experiences resulting in negative mental and physical health outcomes, or potentially put them in life threatening situations. Libraries can address this issue by ensuring they have resources available to educate not only LGBTQ+ youth but their parents or guardians, as well. A majority of participants in the study also indicated that family-based sexual health programs can serve a role in providing better sexual health information to LGBTQ+ teens as well as education on LGBTQ+ sexuality, dating,

and identity development to their parents or guardians. Again, this is a need public libraries are well-positioned to address by partnering with community organizations such as PFLAG, an LGBTQ+ family advocacy and support group, to offer programming to facilitate better access to LGBTQ+ health needs. Partnerships such as this also help to publicly situate public libraries as anchors in community-based health information outreach and public health initiatives.

A study conducted in Ireland, published in a 2019 issue of the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, explored the power of social connectedness in advancing wellbeing in the LGBTQ+ community (Ceatha et al., 2019). Its findings, informed by the World Health Organization's *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* and an approach to social justice that centers identity recognition as a catalyst for social change, can be used to inform and justify the role public libraries can play as active participants in inclusive public health interventions for the LGBTQ+ community (World Health Organisation, 1986). Anti-discrimination policies and laws promoting inclusivity do not cause the social manifestations of homophobia and transphobia, which negatively impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals, to disappear. The fostering and sustaining of supportive environments are crucial to promoting better wellbeing. Through actively providing targeted programming, or passively by creating a space where LGBTQ+ youth feel safe and welcome, public libraries can facilitate social connections that help offset the stressors of stigmatization and prejudice. This is why public libraries should not silo their LGBTQ+ outreach or visible allyship to Pride Month, but should engage with and promote LGBTQ+ materials and community year round to communicate that their services and spaces remain welcome, accessible, and safe.

Particular attention needs to be given to meeting the health information needs of transgender (*abbreviated hereafter as "trans"*) youth. There has been limited research into the information needs and information seeking behavior of this subset of the LGBTQ+ community, but what research has been done shows trans patrons' needs shift depending on where they are in their coming out process. Early on, these patrons are trying to learn more about trans identity and the experiences of others who identify like they do, eventually shifting to look for information on public policy, activism, and discrimination as they become more comfortable with their trans identity (Taylor, 2002). A study by Beiriger and Jackson identified the top three information needs of trans patrons as legal, health, and community support (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007). Legal information ranges from document changes to non-discrimination policies in healthcare, employment, and housing. Unfortunately, because of the uncertainty of a welcome environment and a desire for anonymity, trans individuals tend to rely on the Internet to meet their information needs (Taylor, 2002). This leaves them susceptible to misinformation and disinformation that can result in negative health outcomes. Moreover, those patrons who might rely on public libraries for Internet access face the added obstacle of website filtering and blocking software.

Public libraries must work to make their spaces more welcoming of trans patrons as part of their role in serving as a partner in meeting the public health needs of the LGBTQ+ community. They can do this by creating more displays and exhibits of works featuring trans characters or written by trans authors, that moves away from a gender binary to language more inclusive of the spectrum of gender expression, establishing gender-neutral restrooms, and coordinating more intentional programming that centers trans lives and experiences (Jardine, 2013). Unfortunately, the current cause célèbre among the far-right – perfectly exemplified by comments made at the American Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2023 who called for the “eradication of transgenderism” - is whether trans individuals have a right to exist, so libraries committed to serving this particular population need to do so with contingency.

cies in place for navigating political and social blowback (Luneau, 2023). Steps should also be taken to ensure the safety of trans patrons and this might include compiling a trans resource list in lieu of consolidating information within a particular space in the collections (Jardine, 2013). Consolidating materials under a “Trans Resources” category can invite harassment, violence, and draw attention to specific titles for attempted censorship, whereas an available resource list outlining the various fiction, nonfiction, media, etc. that may be of interest to trans patrons allows for a more discreet way of meeting the needs of this population in a safe, anonymous way.

As reactionary nationalist movements seek to remove material not in line with their social order, it is increasingly important for public libraries to critically examine how they ensure access to information resources to this at-risk community. These resources run the gamut from queer-centered YA fiction to children’s books that allow the child of a same-sex couple to see their family reflected in a positive light, to information about LGBTQ+ history, to access to online social groups, and to sexual health information. Public librarians must also partner with local LGBTQ+ community organizations and offer physical space to allow for in-person community building, networking, and resource sharing. Programming should also help to educate the friends and family of LGBTQ+ youth on how to better understand their lived experiences and show up as allies and advocates.

Public libraries are also in an ideal position to serve as leaders in their communities by stepping up to build bridges between partisan and cultural divides through social justice oriented programming. The skills required to successfully manage this should be introduced while pursuing the MLS/MLIS degree.

Building Safe and Affirming Community

Public libraries have historically played a role in fostering civic engagement within their communities. They should continue to build on this legacy through programming that utilizes frameworks that build empathy for social change. This can be done through programs that pull from intergroup dialogue research, community events modeled on the Human Library project, and programming aimed at increasing the awareness of lived experiences of the LGBTQ+ community (Abergel, 2019). Helping to demystify the lived realities of LGBTQ+ people and provide multiple avenues for shining a light on their humanity can help shift local communities to create more spaces where they feel seen, safe, and affirmed.

One such example is the Human Library, which was developed in Copenhagen in 2000. Its basic premise is positioning a person as a “book” that answers questions based on their personal experience. These “books” often represent a marginalized population. The interaction allows the “reader” to be in control of the conversation to foster openness, curiosity, and an environment to build empathy. Public libraries exist at a community crossroads that makes them the perfect institution to partner with this project to increase community connection and understanding within their local community.

An excellent example of the power of this type of programming comes out of Hungary, under the the banner of the “Living Library” toolkit through the Council of Europe, which was assisted in its development by the Human Library Organization. This study examined the impact of the Living Library’s prejudice reduction intervention programming in combating social stigma against Roma and LGBTQ+ people among high school students in a culture where prejudices towards these communities are highly explicit across media and political discourse (Orosz et al., 2016). Representatives from the Roma and LGBTQ+ communities served as the “books” while the high school students were the “readers.” The result of this study

found that prejudice towards these populations decreased significantly as a result of this type of intergroup programming.

When this study was published in 2016 the authors made a point to highlight how the Hungarian social context was unique and specifically named the United States as an example where tolerance is more extensively endorsed. In the years since publication, the American political right and social conservatives have openly embraced far-right authoritarian leaders, including the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, and his concept of “illiberal democracy.” Hungary has become such a central model of the Republican vision for America that a premier annual conservative conference, CPAC, has hosted two events in Budapest, and hosted Orbán as a featured speaker at their 2022 conference in Dallas (Spike, 2023; Weber, 2022). Orbán’s speeches at these events consistently highlight a shared disdain for “progressive elites,” “woke culture,” LGBTQ+ rights, and education - often under the guise of protecting children (Spike, 2023). Many of the anti-LGBTQ+ attacks we’ve seen in the United States in recent years, such as the increased attacks on trans athletes and Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law, bare remarkable similarities to Orbán’s attacks on depictions of LGBTQ+ content in media and the erasure of discussion on gender or sexuality in Hungarian schools.

A prejudice reduction initiative that found success in Hungary in 2016 can serve as a powerful roadmap for combating homophobia, transphobia, and bigotry in the current American political and social landscape. The tactics employed by the political and social right rely on creating deep divides rooted in misinformation, distrust, and suspicion of those they consider undeserving of equal rights or the ability to exist in public. The constant refrain of “groomer” is a resurrected tool meant to tie any trace of queerness to the notion of child sexual abuse. The accusation of “indoctrination” is both an immediate shutdown of the recognition of the innateness of sexual and gender identity in an individual, as well as a callback to the dangerous rhetoric of social contagion. These tactics are meant to build walls between individuals and communities. Programming like the Human Library helps to prevent or dismantle these walls.

However, this should only be one of many tools employed by public libraries, which serve as agents of social change in their communities to help overcome division and polarization. Another effective tool at their disposal is the intergroup dialogue program.

The overwhelming majority of anti-LGBTQ+ animus currently overtaking social discourse is rooted in far-right evangelical movements, and much of the legal cover given by both legislatures and the judiciary is framed within the context of “religious freedom” that, strangely, seems deferential to a very specific, very narrow understanding of faith and religiosity. Given this, a perfect example of the type of intergroup dialogue programming that could be pursued by public libraries comes from a study examining social work students’ experiences in a Christianity and sexual minority intergroup dialogue (Joslin et al., 2016). (*Note: The authors use the acronym “LGB” within the context of their study, but this paper will continue to use “LGBTQ+” to encompass the range of queer community.*) While participants in this dialogue reported challenges such as Christian students conflating discomfort with oppression, navigating the perspectives of those who identified as both LGBTQ+ and Christian, and struggles with appropriate use of the term “ally,” there were also several positive outcomes. Christian-heterosexual students appeared to have gained a better understanding of their LGBTQ+ peers and the issues impacting them, participants who identified as both LGBTQ+ and Christian were better able to integrate their identities, and several participants reconsidered certain political opinions after having been exposed to the lived experiences of others. It is also important to note that many of the challenges experienced in this dialogue could have been overcome through better, or more informed, facilitation.

A similar study looked at the experiences of heterosexual students in sexual orientation intergroup dialogue courses (Dessel et al., 2013). This study found that, due to engaging in the intergroup dialogue process with LGBTQ+ peers, heterosexual students developed a better sense of empathy for their peers and there was a measurable reduction in bias. One of the key ways intergroup dialogue helped to achieve these outcomes was because it allowed students who had no prior interaction with LGBTQ+ people to engage with the community. Additionally, the heterosexual participants that fell into this category “unanimously concluded that partaking in the dialogue helped them to accept [LGBTQ+] people and better understand this community” (pp.1067). Participants also left this experience with a reported set of intended behaviors which included gaining more friends and acquaintances in sexual minority groups, and interrupting discrimination and offensive language used by peers and family members.

I have been a facilitator in an intergroup dialogue program at the University of Maryland, College Park since 2017. In that time I have co-facilitated dialogues on topics including race, gender identity, sexuality, and disability; worked with groups consisting solely of students, or blended groups of faculty and staff; assisted in the training of staff and student facilitators; assisted in the development of college and program-specific dialogue courses across campus; and participated in research examining the efficacy of intergroup dialogue in virtual spaces during COVID utilizing Critical Race Theory. I have witnessed firsthand the successes and challenges of this practice and pedagogy and know, if properly implemented within public library spaces, it can serve a vital role in bridging community division, generate more civic engagement, and build empathy.

The type of intergroup dialogue I am trained in, and which I am proposing be utilized in public library programming, is based on exploring group differences with a goal of fostering individual and systemic change by:

- Developing awareness of one’s own power and privilege
- Exploring the similarities and differences both within and across different social groups
- Fostering dialogical skills for addressing conflict between groups
- Examining social justice issues across various levels (personal, interpersonal, institutional, etc.)
- Identifying actions that contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and socially just outcomes (Zúñiga et al., 2002)

Successful intergroup dialogue programs bring groups together for sustained conversations over a number of weeks. Participants must have time to build relationships and establish trust. It is also important for the facilitators to ensure a safe, collaborative environment that is co-created and co-owned by all participants. The model I use and recommend spends several weeks familiarizing participants with the dialogue process, explains the difference between dialogue and debate, and utilizes a number of relationship building activities before actively engaging in dialogue over “hot topics” over several sessions. Most importantly, the intergroup dialogue process must allow for time to discuss and plan actionable steps that participants can take to foster more socially just outcomes around the dialogue topic (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001).

While my experience and much of the literature around this particular form of dialogue focuses on its role in fostering individual growth and building understanding across group differences in higher education settings, this has been shown to be a powerful tool in community-based settings as well. For example, a community-based intergroup dialogue lead by Adrienne Dessel on same-sex marriage within a Baptist church raised the possibility that their

community could choose to marry same-sex couples even if that meant breaking away from their parent organization (Dessel et al., 2006).

When designing this type of programming, it is important that public libraries understand that facilitated dialogue is not a silver bullet that can be offered once and solve homophobia. In order to have a measurable impact, participants must meet consistently over several weeks to allow participants the opportunity to get to know and trust each other and to allow the facilitator to create and hold space where participants can be challenged in their beliefs and invited to be vulnerable.

Finally, programming that exposes the broader community to the lived experiences of the LGBTQ+ community can help to build empathy and understanding. With respect to inter-group dialogue programming, these types of initiatives need to be consistent and not just a one-off guest speaker or movie night during Pride Month in order to truly have an impact in the community. It's also important that any programs about the LGBTQ+ community provide context and engagement, especially to people who are not members of that community. Simply putting out information about the LGBTQ+ community could just as easily elicit indifference, suspicion, or fear, as it could empathy or compassion (Maoz & Frosh, 2020). Are you hosting a screening of *Love, Simon*? Why not pair it with a panel of LGBTQ+ youth talking about their coming out experiences in the local community? In your celebration of Black History Month, why not provide a spotlight on the impact of Black queer authors and artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jimmie Daniels, and Ethel Waters? Are there works by LGBTQ+ authors or featuring queer characters that take place in your town or state that could be highlighted to show LGBTQ+ people are, and have been, part of the community?

Coalition building with community, understanding how to navigate cross-community tensions in order to build empathy and understanding, and designing intentional partnerships with government agencies and local resources to support LGBTQ+ youth, or any marginalized community, should not be skills that librarians are expected to inherently possess or learn on the job. In order to maximize the impact public libraries can have as allies and advocates these skills need to be intentionally incorporated into the professional and academic training they receive through accredited MLS/MLIS programs.

Teaching for the Reality of Public Librarianship

A 2016 paper by Paul T. Jaeger and Lindsay C. Sarin makes the argument that librarianship is inherently political and that expecting "the profession to be neutral on issues that impact our jobs, institutions, and the people we serve is cowardice" (Jaeger & Sarin, 2016). They correctly draw attention to the fact that MLS/MLIS curricula today have more in common with the 1950's focus on reference, management, and research methodology than in meeting the needs of the modern library and contemporary information landscape. Their paper mentions several educational components that should be embedded in MLS/MLIS curricula; of those, five are intimately relevant with the ideas for protecting LGBTQ+ youth put forward in this paper. They are: activism and advocacy, leadership, public policy and law, community outreach and engagement, and human rights and social justice.

In the current socio-political environment almost any initiative that centers a historically excluded population will be labeled as "woke" and become a magnet for political gamesmanship, fearmongering, and backlash. Public librarians find themselves needing to step up as not only advocates for these vulnerable communities, but also as spokespersons for the inherent public

good provided by libraries. It seems the current approach to equipping librarians to navigate these responsibilities is less about academic or professional preparation and more about expecting them to be forged into leaders in the crucible of public scrutiny and attack. Not only has this consistently left libraries unprepared and two steps behind, it is unethical and inhumane.

In January 2023 the ALA approved and adopted as policy a new set of Core Competences for Librarianship (American Library Association, n.d.-a). This document acknowledges it is the first time that social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion are intentionally incorporated into these core competencies. It also notes that this newly adopted policy is not intended “as a prescriptive document for library school curriculum” but that it can be used to inform curriculum development and professional development for early career library professionals. The inclusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion focused themes throughout the various competencies, as well as the inclusion of a competency specifically focused on social justice is admirable, but the passive positionality of this policy places the burden of preparing culturally competent advocate librarians on higher education institutions, who are likely to avoid rocking the socio-political boat if they can help it, or on individual libraries or librarians, who may not have the resources to pursue professional development opportunities.

On December 1, 2023, the ALA announced updates to their Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies (American Library Association, 2023). One of the most remarkable aspects of these updated standards is the explicit focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Instead of limited references to a “diverse and global society” and “underserved groups” the new standards center these values uniquely within each category, and specifically name the inclusion of underrepresented and underserved communities in the systematic planning and curriculum review processes (American Library Association, n.d.-b). Of specific relevance to this paper, the standards call for program-level learning outcomes in MLS/MLIS programs to be informed by the most recent version of the ALA Core Competencies and Core Values, include a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and names social justice and equity as specific areas in which faculty should be expected to remain updated and current in their skills.

Under these new standards, I encourage MLS/MLIS programs to critically examine how they can better prepare their students for the reality of public librarianship. One example, as mentioned earlier, is facilitator training for intergroup dialogue programs. Incorporating this into MLS/MLIS curricula can better prepare future librarians to navigate difficult conversations and develop community-specific programming aimed at bridging divides, fostering empathy, and promoting increased civic engagement. This is borne out in the results of a study tracking graduates of Skidmore College’s Intergroup Relations minor, the first established intergroup dialogue minor in the United States (Ford & Lipkin, 2019). Students in this minor trained to become co-facilitators in race dialogues, and the study found these facilitators “developed dialogic skills that were paramount to leadership education, including their ability to understand, synthesize, and translate social justice principles to their post-college lives” (pp.53).

Incorporating the intergroup dialogue experience into the MLS/MLIS program should expose students to the experiences of being both a participant and a facilitator. A potential approach is to develop a two-semester sequence that exposes students to the intergroup dialogue process and encourages critical self-reflection. In the first semester, students engage as participants in a 7-week intergroup dialogue so they not only experience what it is like to be a participant, but they also learn how to engage with their own internal biases. The following 7 weeks should consist of reflection on the experience as well as facilitator training and dialogic skills building. In the subsequent semester, students serve as co-facilitators helping to lead an intergroup dialogue. Students are paired with experienced co-facilitators, and meet weekly

with their intergroup dialogue instructor to reflect on the process and check in. A course sequence such as this would more than meet a program-level learning outcome associated with the social justice core competency adopted by the ALA, while also preparing future librarians for serving as bridge-builders and advocates for social justice in their communities.

The updated accreditation standards also encourage looking to the ALA Core Values for informing program-level learning outcomes. Three of these values are Democracy, The Public Good, and Social Responsibility, and yet to meaningfully express these values would run counter to the neutrality expected of librarians and libraries as institutions (American Library Association, 2006). Are librarians only expected to help create an informed citizenry while relegating themselves to the sidelines of the democratic process when their jobs are at stake? To position libraries as a public good inherently means coming into conflict with forces that view information access as anathema to their preferred social order. How does a librarian engage in “solving the critical problems of society” without taking a non-neutral stance (American Library Association, 2006)? Whether they are testifying before a school board to oppose censorship, justifying their budgetary needs to a municipal board, or communicating the impacts of proposed policy decisions to their community, public librarians are already engaged in advocacy and should be properly equipped to navigate this arena upon completion of their graduate program (Durney, 2023). Teaching future librarians to interpret local, state, and federal laws that govern everything from information access to discrimination to funding decisions allows them to be proactive advocates instead of reactive defenders, and also equips them to be better community leaders on matters of civic engagement (Fogarty, 2016).

Public librarians should also be better trained on community organizing and coalition building with the communities in which they work. A review of libraries “coming out” in support of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, Canada, and Brazil found the common theme across institutions was the role of partnerships with community members and organizations (McEachreon, 2016). This review specifically mentioned a 2014 study of how Brazil has been working to combat homophobia since the United Nations declared “zero tolerance” against discrimination or violence based on sexual orientation. Survey responses from 61 LGBTQ+ organizations in Brazil specifically named public libraries as having promoted LGBTQ+ citizens through both collection development and supporting events aimed at LGBTQ+ visibility (Alentejo, 2014). While the power of partnering with local community resources and organizations to support historically marginalized communities may be apparent, how are future librarians being prepared to do this work? Neither the current nor proposed accreditation standards address leadership in a way that acknowledges that public librarians work beyond the physical and virtual confines of the library itself.

Aside from instruction on developing targeted programming, how are MLS/MLIS programs training future public librarians on how to be active and engaged members of the community? Kan-Rasmussen succinctly summarizes the impossible position of being a politically neutral social justice change agent when they state that libraries “are places where values such as diversity, equity, and inclusiveness compete with values of neutrality, anti-censorship, and freedom of speech (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022). In their 2021 paper, they offer the use of an Orders of Worth (OoW) framework established by Boltanski and Thévenot for understanding the legitimization and justification of librarians’ engagement in social agendas (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). This framework allows discursive space for understanding the inherently non-neutral positionality and tensions between librarians’ individual identities, institutional identities, and perceived or real obligations. It establishes libraries as a compromise between three of the eight established worlds in the OoW framework: the industrial world (efficient,

professional), civic world (collective, rule governed), and projective world (proliferation of connections, flexible, involved).

An example of the projective world provided in Kan-Rasmussen’s research highlights the benefit of creating networks and establishing partnerships as strengthening an organization’s legitimacy (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022). MLS/MLIS programs should look for ways to incorporate the application of this OoW framework to legitimize public libraries’ involvement in social agendas in order to provide an operational foundation in which future librarians can justify their involvement in advancing social justice within their communities. Additionally, the three worlds approach provides a possible curricular framework that allows space for reflection on the tensions librarians will need to navigate in meeting legal, institutional, community, and ethical obligations.

With the adoption of new accreditation standards, the ALA has provided an opportunity for universities to fundamentally reshape how they prepare students for librarianship that centers community leadership and advocacy. The changes proposed in this white paper are just a few ways in which MLS/MLIS curricula can better acknowledge the modern landscape in which librarians find themselves. While this argument puts forward several avenues public libraries can better protect LGBTQ+ youth, the reality is that all members of the community would benefit from librarians that are better equipped to step up as social justice leaders.

The Mouse Will Not Appreciate Your Neutrality⁴

On October 25, 2023, two members of Moms for Liberty, a far-right extremist organization that opposes LGBTQ+ and racially inclusive materials and that has been one of the key drivers of book bans across the country, reported school librarians to the Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office in Florida on accusations of distributing pornography to minors (Legum, 2023). The “pornography” in question was *Storm and Fury*, a popular young adult novel, which had been checked out of a school library by a 17-year-old student. Beyond the inherent absurdity in “protecting” a 17-year-old from a young adult novel lies the fact that this student apparently only checked out the book at the request of a teacher, who is not an employee of their school or even in their county, who then immediately turned the book over to Moms for Liberty. In their crusade to safeguard children from the dangers of teen romance, gargoyle shape-shifters, and communicating with ghosts (the plot synopsis of the offending text per the author’s website) it would appear conscripting and manipulating the children they are supposedly out to protect is not off the table (*Storm and Fury*, 2019).

This incident is a perfect example of how “protecting the children” is just a smokescreen for the true goal of rolling back decades of progress in elevating the voices of historically oppressed and erased communities. If this is how they are willing to treat young people in general, it is no surprise that the impacts their attacks on schools and libraries have on marginalized youth, especially LGBTQ+ youth, do not phase them. All children need advocates and allies to ensure their right to access information to foster learning and development about themselves and the world. However, marginalized youth who are most at risk of being left behind in these conversations need support most of all.

Public libraries are uniquely positioned to serve as bastions of support for LGBTQ+ youth in this intensified culture war. They have the potential to be critical partners in combat-

⁴ You are most likely familiar with the full quote by Desmond Tutu: “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality” (Ratcliffe, 2017).

ing the negative health outcomes plaguing LGBTQ+ youth as a result of stigmatization, bullying, and the callous way in which culturally conservative politicians demean and dehumanize the LGBTQ+ community. Their ability to provide access to information resources on identity development and sexual health, an accurate portrayal of LGBTQ+ history, queer representation across media, community organizations, and physical or virtual safe spaces, can literally save lives.

This white paper has addressed the role intergroup dialogue programming can, and should, play in public libraries' responses to anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in building deeper community engagement and empathy. This type of programming requires proper training of facilitators to ensure safe, productive learning environments. An additional need coming from this discussion is the necessity of public librarians to learn the skills necessary to engage with their communities, public officials, local schools, and other resources and institutions to anchor themselves as key players in advocating for LGBTQ+ youth. However, the skills necessary to pursue these kinds of initiatives and partnerships are ones that tend to be excluded from core curricula in MLS/MLIS programs. The new ALA accreditation standards, core competencies, and core values allow space to infer the skills to be social justice advocates and defenders are critical parts of modern librarianship, yet too often inference alone allows room for omission when it comes to curricula or practical skills development.

References

- Abergel, R. (2019, July 31). *Unjudge Someone - the Human Library Organization*". The Human Library Organization. humanlibrary.org
- Adelson, S. L., Reid, G., Miller, A. M., & Sandfort, T. G. M. (2021). Health Justice for LGBT Youth: Combining Public Health and Human Rights. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(7). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2021.02.021>
- Alentejo, E. S. (2014). Power and Community: Organization and Cultural LGBT Responses against Homophobia and Promotion of Inclusion Values. *IFLA WLIC*, 1–8. Paper presented at the IFLA WLIC 2014. Lyon. Libraries, Citizens, Societies: Confluence for Knowledge Session 151. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning Users Special Interest Group.
- Alexander, L. B., & Miselis, S. D. (2007). Barriers to GLBTQ Collection Development and Strategies for Overcoming Them. *Young Adult Library Services*, 5(3), 43–49.
- American Civil Liberties Union. (2024). *Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2024*. American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2024>
- American Library Association. (n.d.-a). *Core Competences*. Education & Careers. <https://www.ala.org/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences>
- American Library Association. (n.d.-b). *Standards, process, policies, and procedures (AP3)*. Education & Careers. <https://www.ala.org/educationcareers/accreditedprograms/standards>
- American Library Association. (2006, July 26). *Core Values of Librarianship*. Advocacy, Legislation & Issues. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>
- American Library Association. (2023, December 1). *COA announces 2023 ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies | ALA*. www.ala.org. <https://www.ala.org/news/2019/02/coa-announces-2023-ala-standards-accreditation-masters-programs-library-and>

- American Library Association. (2024, March 14). *American Library Association reports record number of unique book titles challenged in 2023* | ALA. www.ala.org/news/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles
- Beiriger, A., & Jackson, R. M. (2007). An Assessment of the Information Needs of Transgender Communities in Portland, Oregon. *Public Library Quarterly*, 26(1-2), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1300/j118v26n01_03
- Bellamy-Walker, T. (2022, January 6). *Book bans in schools are catching fire. Black authors say uproar isn't about students*. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/book-bans-schools-are-catching-fire-black-authors-say-uproar-isnt-stud-rcna10228>
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification : economies of worth*. Princeton University Press.
- Ceatha, N., Mayock, P., Campbell, J., Noone, C., & Browne, K. (2019). The Power of Recognition: A Qualitative Study of Social Connectedness and Wellbeing through LGBT Sporting, Creative and Social Groups in Ireland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(19), 3636. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16193636>
- Chappell, B. (2021, October 28). *A Texas lawmaker is targeting 850 books that he says could make students feel uneasy*. NPR; NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/28/1050013664/texas-lawmaker-matt-krause-launches-inquiry-into-850-books/>
- Dessel, A., Rogge, M. E., & Garlington, S. B. (2006). Using Intergroup Dialogue to Promote Social Justice and Change. *Social Work*, 51(4), 303–315. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/51.4.303>
- Dessel, A. B., Woodford, M. R., Routenberg, R., & Breijak, D. P. (2013). Heterosexual Students’ Experiences in Sexual Orientation Intergroup Dialogue Courses. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60(7), 1054–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.776413>
- Durney, S. (2023). The Library Advocacy Gap: Increasing Librarians’ Political Self-Efficacy. *The Political Librarian*, 6(1), 34–57. <https://doi.org/10.7936/pollib.8771>
- EveryLibrary Institute (2023). *Voter Perceptions of Book Bans in the United States*. <https://doi.org/10.7936/pollib.8766>
- Fogarty, V. (2016). Libraries and Human Rights - Working Together to Reach Our Full Potential. *Perspectives on Libraries as Institutions of Human Rights and Social Justice. Advances in Librarianship*, 41, 47–46.
- Ford, K. A., & Lipkin, H. J. (2019). Intergroup Dialogue Facilitators as Agents for Change. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2019(163), 47–56. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20346>
- Holt, D. (2006). Internet Filtering and the Adolescent Gay/Lesbian Patron. *Library Student Journal*.
- Holt, D. B. (2009). LGBTIQ Teens - Plugged in and Unfiltered: How Internet Filtering Impairs Construction of Online Communities, Identity Formation, and Access to Health Information. *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access*, 266–277. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1761806>
- Jaeger, P. T., & Sarin, L. C. (2016). All Librarianship Is Political: Educate Accordingly. *The Political Librarian*, 2(1), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.7936/pollib.8515>
- Jardine, F. M. (2013). Inclusive Information for Trans* Persons. *Public Library Quarterly*, 32(3), 240–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2013.818856>
- Jia, R. M., Du, J. T., & Zhao, Y. C. (2021). Characteristics of the health information seeking behavior of LGBTQ+ individuals: a systematic review on information types, information sources and influencing factors. *Journal of Documentation*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print). <https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-03-2021-0069>

- Joslin, J. Y., Dessel, A. B., & Woodford, M. R. (2016). Social work students' experiences in a Christianity and sexual minority intergroup dialogue. *Social Work Education, 35*(5), 547–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1178716>
- Kann-Rasmussen, N. (2022). When librarians speak up: justifications for and legitimacy implications of librarians' engagement in social movements. *Journal of Documentation, 79*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-02-2022-0042>
- Legum, J. (2023, November 13). *How Moms for Liberty and a notorious English teacher exploited a high school student*. Popular.info. <https://popular.info/p/how-moms-for-liberty-and-a-notorious>
- Lubin, J., & Vaccaro, J. (2020). AIDS infrastructures, queer networks: Architecting the critical path. *First Monday, 25*(10). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i10.10403>
- Luneau, D. (2023, March 6). *Human rights campaign: Extremists at CPAC laid bare hatred at root of vile legislation targeting trans people*. Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-extremists-at-cpac-laid-bare-hatred-at-root-of-vile-legislation-targeting-trans-people>
- Maoz, I., & Frosh, P. (2020). Imagine All the People: Negotiating and Mediating Moral Concern through Intergroup Encounters. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research, 13*(3), 197–210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12189>
- Mathson, S., & Hancks, J. (2007). Privacy Please? A Comparison Between Self-Checkout and Book Checkout Desk Circulation Rates for LGBT and Other Books. *Journal of Access Services, 4*(3-4), 27–37. https://doi.org/10.1300/j204v04n03_02
- McEachreon, P. (2016). Libraries “Coming Out” in Support of LGBTQIA+ Human Rights and Social Justice. *Advances in Librarianship, 41*, 183–208. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s0065-283020160000041032>
- Mehra, B., & Jaber, B. S. (2023). “Don’t Say Gay” in Alabama: A taxonomic framework of LGBTQ+ information support services in public libraries—An exploratory website content analysis of critical resistance. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 74*(8), 954–970. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24768>
- Movement Advancement Project. (n.d.-a). *Movement Advancement Project | Forced Outing of Transgender Youth in Schools*. www.mapresearch.org. Retrieved May 8, 2024, from https://www.mapresearch.org/equality-maps/youth/forced_outing
- Movement Advancement Project. (n.d.-b). *Movement Advancement Project | LGBTQ Curricular Laws*. www.lgbtmap.org. https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality_maps/curricular_laws
- Nath, R., Matthews, D. D., DeChants, J. P., Hobacia, S., Clark, C. M., Taylor, A. B., & Muñoz, G. (2024). *2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People*. The Trevor Project. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024>
- Newcomb, M. E., Feinstein, B. A., Matson, M., Macapagal, K., & Mustanski, B. (2018). “I Have No Idea What’s Going On Out There.” Parents’ Perspectives on Promoting Sexual Health in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescents. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 15*(2), 111–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0326-0>
- Onsind. (2010). *Heterosexuality Is a Construct*. onsind.bandcamp.com/track/heterosexuality-is-a-construct
- Orosz, G., Bánki, E., Bóthe, B., Tóth-Király, I., & Tropp, L. R. (2016). Don’t judge a living book by its cover: effectiveness of the living library intervention in reducing prejudice toward Roma and LGBT people. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 46*(9), 510–517. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12379>
- Ratcliffe, S. (2017). *Oxford Essential Quotations*. Oxford University Press.

- Spike, J. (2023, January 25). *Hungary to host conservative conference for 2nd time*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-united-states-government-hungary-viktor-orban-115b0b3356bb7c1fb5cd43c4f6260b1a>
- Sprayregen, M. (2023, September 5). *Did this Senator just admit her Internet safety act could ban kids from seeing trans content?* LGBTQ Nation. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/09/did-this-senator-just-admit-her-internet-safety-act-could-ban-kids-from-accessing-trans-content/>
- Stevens, J. P. & Supreme Court of the United States. (1996) *U.S. Reports: Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 U.S. 844 [Periodical] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep521844/>.
- U.S. Reports: Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union, 521 U.S. 844, (Supreme Court of the United States 1996). U.S. Reports: Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union, 521 U.S. 844 *Storm and Fury*. (2019, October 16). Jennifer L. Armentrout. <https://jenniferlarmentrout.com/books/storm-and-fury/>
- Taylor, J. K. (2002). Targeting the Information Needs of Transgender Individuals. *Current Studies in Librarianship*, 26(1/2), 85–109.
- Weber, P. J. (2022, August 4). *Autocratic Hungarian leader Orban hailed by US conservatives*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-donald-trump-dallas-marjorie-taylor-greene-3c5a43ea6cd3a3472a05f48d3b527a76>
- Wexelbaum, R. S. (2018). Do libraries save LGBT students? *Library Management*, 39(1/2), 31–58. <https://doi.org/10.1108/lm-02-2017-0014>
- World Health Organisation. (1986). *First International Conference on Health Promotion*. World Health Organisation. <https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/enhanced-wellbeing/first-global-conference>
- Zúñiga, X., Naagda, B. (Ratnesh) A., & Sevig, T. D. (2002). Intergroup Dialogues: An Educational Model for Cultivating Engagement Across Differences. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 35(1), 7–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713845248>
- Zúñiga, X., & Nagda, B. A. (2001). Design Considerations in Intergroup Dialogue. In D. Schoem & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace* (pp. 306–327). The University of Michigan Press.

Author

Ron Padrón is a transplant to Maryland from the swamps of South Florida. He began working in higher education as an academic advisor serving at-risk student populations and now serves as an administrator centering justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility more broadly: from course and curriculum development to student services and shared governance. He has presented on advocacy and diversity work in higher education, is Co-Chair of the UMD President's Commission on LGBTQ+ Issues, has served as a facilitator for social justice dialogue programs across campus, is a member of the planning committee for the Including Disability Global Summit, and Associate Editor for the accompanying journal, *Including Disability*.

The Demographics of Book Bans

The EveryLibrary Institute is interested in understanding if there are any common demographic characteristics between communities that are experiencing book bans and challenges to intellectual freedom and access to information. To better understand this phenomenon, our research team has looked at demographic data about towns, cities, counties, and school districts to identify patterns and find insights about the areas and populations affected by these actions. This paper presents a new analysis of the demographics and political attitudes of the communities experiencing book bans and challenges.

As PEN America reports, 2022 saw the highest number of attempted bans since the organization began tracking data about censorship. Practically every state has been affected by attempted and successful bans, and some states have followed up with legislation that not only makes it easier to challenge but, in some cases, allows states to take the decision-making away from professionals and gives it to politicians instead.

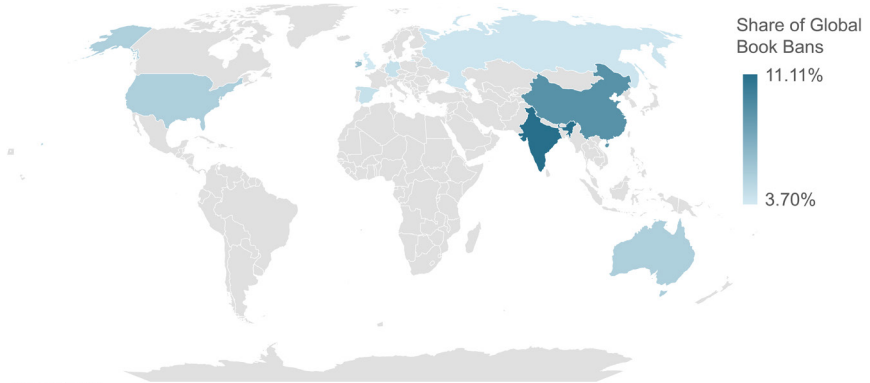
Our investigators first identified the areas experiencing book bans in 2022 and mapped those areas to US Census definitions by geographic or jurisdictional terms. We disregarded areas that were otherwise unidentifiable within Census data. Then, we applied several demographic characteristics to each community or municipal area. These demographic details included college attainment rates, whiteness of populations, income levels, homeownership rates, labor force participation rates, and political affiliation. We also attempted to apply the Gini Index of Inequality to the communities but were unable to match geographic boundaries with enough accuracy. Our research team compared the demographics of ban areas to the national average to identify any significant differences. These characteristics were analyzed to gain insights into the areas and populations most affected by book bans in the United States.

The findings show that areas affected by book bans tend to have a higher rate of bachelor's degrees than the national average, are whiter than the nation as a whole, and have a higher income and percentage of homeowners than the national average. Topline findings show that these communities:

- Have a higher rate of earned bachelor's degrees than the national average
- Skew whiter than the nation as a whole
- Tend to have a higher income than the national average
- Have a higher percentage of homeowners than the national average
- Have extremely high labor force participation
- Have more registered Republicans than Democrats, but Democratic areas are still targeted heavily

Where the United States Stands in the Global Book Ban Landscape

Book Banning Around the World

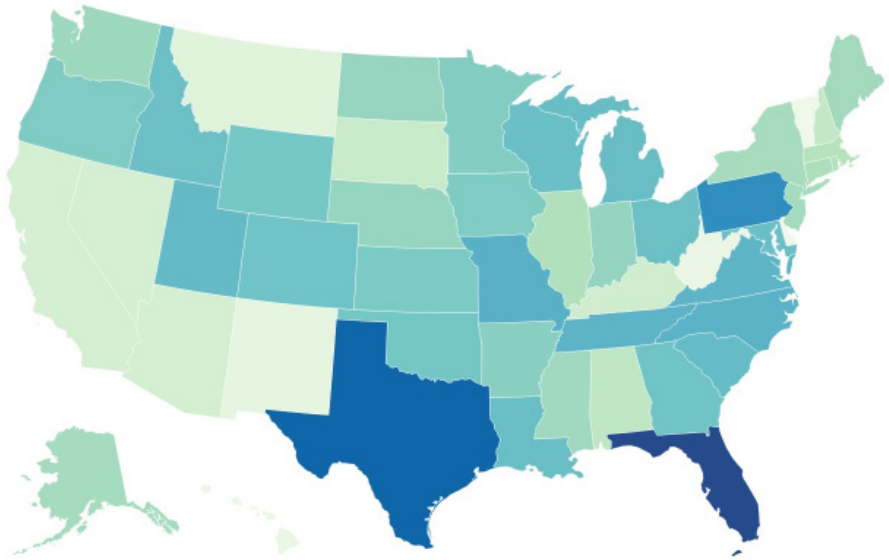


Powered by Bing
© Australian Bureau of Statistics, GeoNames, Microsoft, Navinfo, Open Places, OpenStreetMap, TomTom, Zenrin

Source: *WordsRated*, April 14, 2023

The United States' newfound zeal for book bans has placed it in a group with the authoritarian regimes of India, China, Singapore, and Russia. The United States now has a 1.32% higher share of book bans over Russia.

Number of Book Bans by State, 2021-2023



Created with Datawrapper

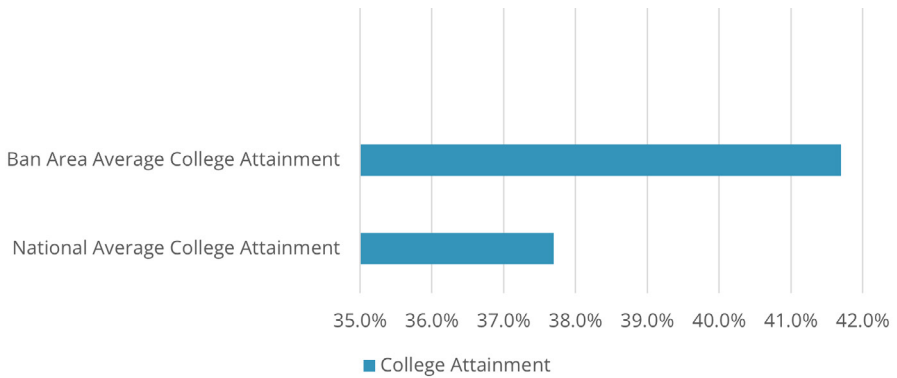
KEY

AL—10	HI—1	MA—15	NM—2	SD—7
AK—23	ID—73	MI—124	NY—22	TN—399
AZ—5	IL—18	MN—46	NC—441	TX—1524
AR—41	IN—31	MS—25	ND—29	UT—240
CA—5	IA—50	MO—485	OH—72	VT—0
CO—66	KS—52	MT—3	OK—60	VA—381
CT—19	KY—6	NE—30	OR—49	WA—26
DE—0	LA—100	NV—5	PA—826	WV—1
FL—1915	ME—24	NH—8	RI—15	WI—87
GA—65	MD—96	NJ—23	SC—192	WY—58

The contenders: Florida leads the nation with the most titles challenged at 1915, while Texas is a close second at 1524. Pennsylvania is third with 826, and Missouri and North Carolina each boast over 400 challenged titles. Tennessee and Virginia trail closely behind with nearly 400 titles each, while Utah, Michigan, and Louisiana each have between 100-300 challenged titles.

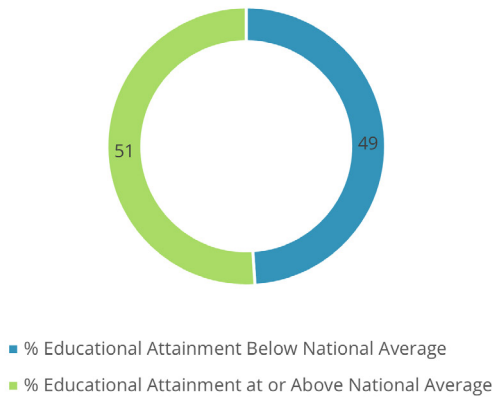
College Attainment – Earned Bachelor’s Degrees

Ban Area Average College Attainment vs. National Average

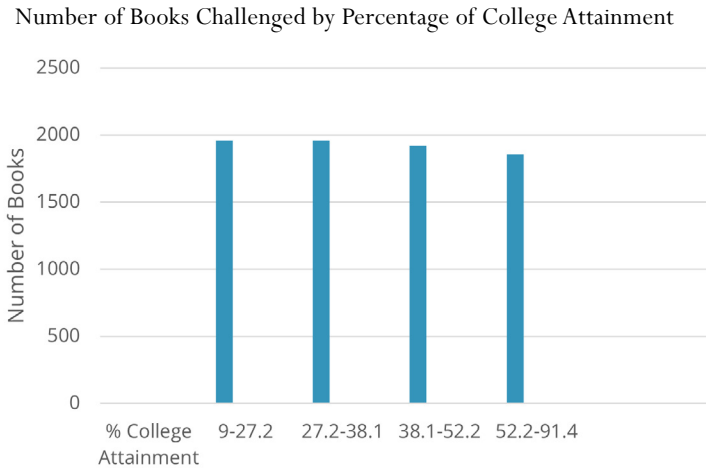


A national average of 37.5% of Americans hold bachelor’s degrees, versus an average of 41.7% of people in book ban areas.

Total Number of Bans



If we look a little deeper into the data, we find that nearly half of ban areas have *less* than the national average of bachelor degree attainment.

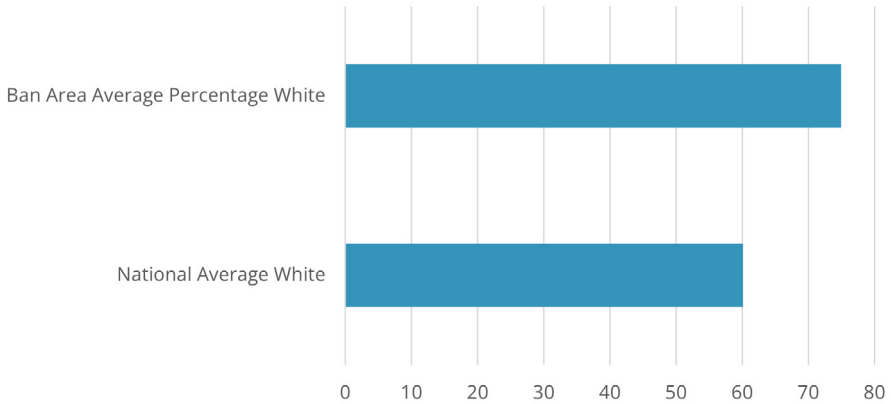


The percentage of bachelor’s degree attainment in ban areas ranges from 9% to 91.4%. The number of challenged books declines slightly as the area’s college attainment increases – but not by much. This shows that educational attainment is not a bulwark against book challenges.

Studies show that educational attainment affects political engagement. Kien Le and My Nguen, in an international study², found that every additional year of education raises an individual’s interest in politics by 6.7%, and increases the individual’s self-perceived political knowledge by 8.5%. In other words, as an individual’s education increases, they believe that they know and understand more about politics. This false bravado may be a factor in recent studies that show that conservatives disproportionately create and spread online misinformation. Moreover, far-right partisans do not fact-check, nor do they check for accuracy before they share the misinformation.³

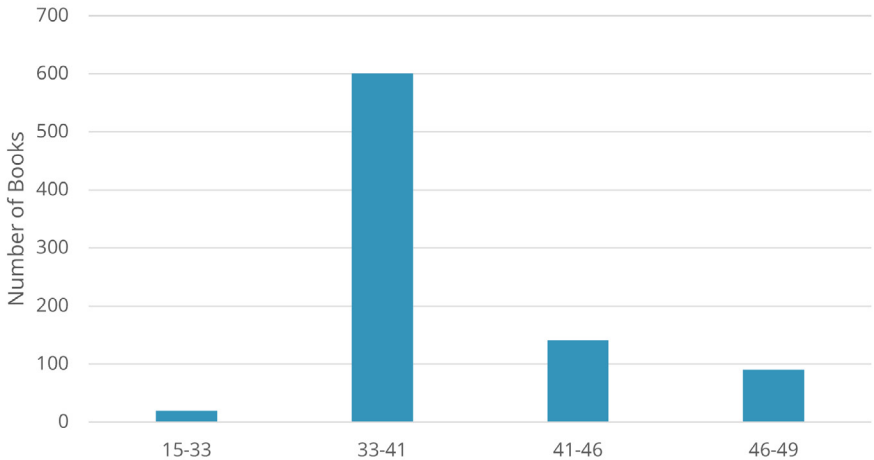
Whiteness of Communities That Experience Bans and Challenges

Percentage of People Identifying as White vs. National Average

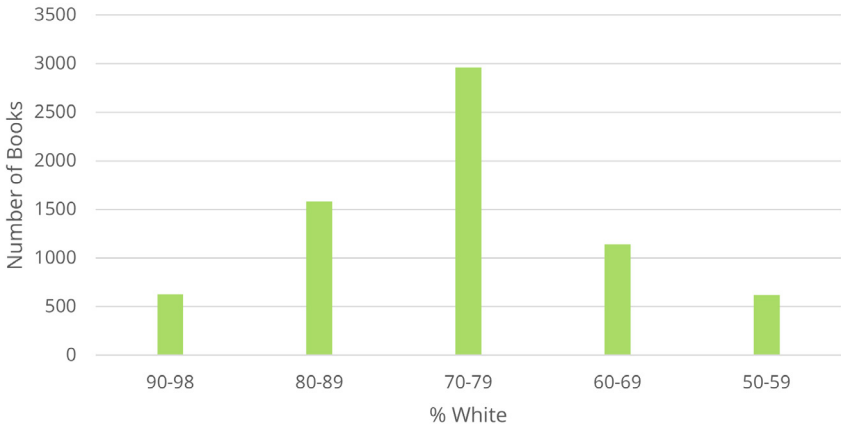


The average percentage of whiteness in areas with book challenges is 75%, versus 61.6% in the nation. Ban area whiteness ranges from 15% in Canutillo, TX to 98% in Maine and Pennsylvania. Areas with minority percentages of whiteness are, on balance, majority Hispanic, and concentrated in the two states with the most bans: Florida and Texas.

Number of Books Challenged by Minority of Whiteness



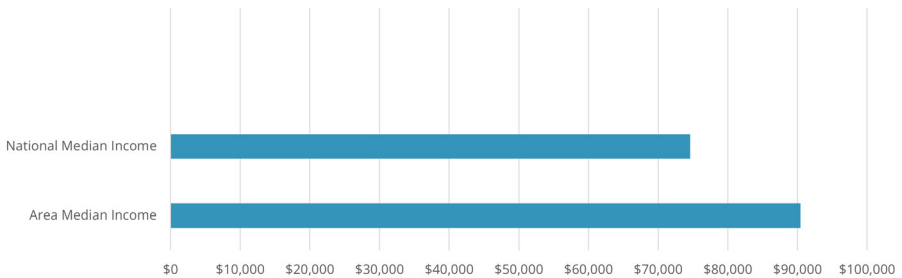
Majority White Areas by # of Books Challenged



For the areas with a population over 50% white, the highest incidence of book challenges occurred in the areas with 70-79% white population. This includes Clay County, FL, where 627 titles were challenged; Central York School District in York County, PA (430 titles); Collierville School District in Shelby County, TN (326 titles); Indian River County, FL (159 titles) and Eanes School District in Travis County, TX (132 titles).

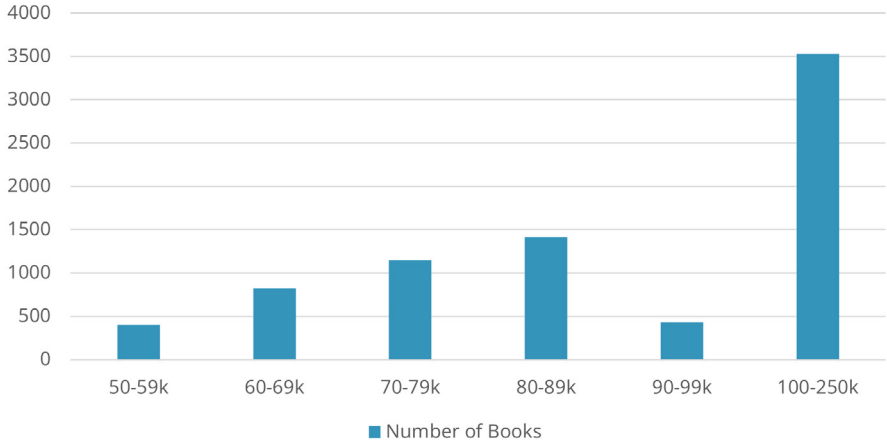
Household Income

Area Median Income vs. National



Areas where book challenges occurred boast a median income of \$90,448 versus \$74,580 for the nation. Areas where bans occurred have populations whose incomes range from \$34,286 in Marion County, MS, to \$250,001 in Democratic regions of Texas, New Jersey, Upstate New York, Illinois, and Connecticut.

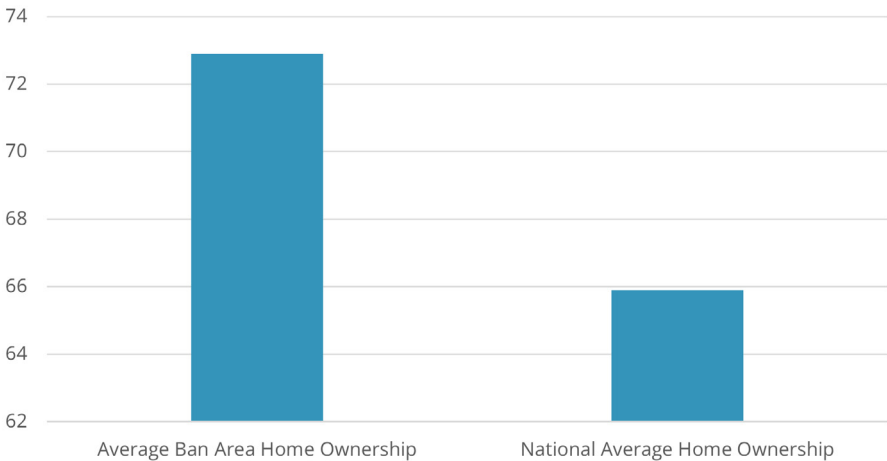
Number of Books Banned by Income



By far, the greatest number of books were banned in areas where people earn between \$100-\$250,000 per year. This includes places such as Fauquier County, VA, where 124 titles were challenged in 2022; McKinney, TX (283 titles); Wentzville, MO (228 titles); and St. Johns County, FL (113 titles).

Home Ownership

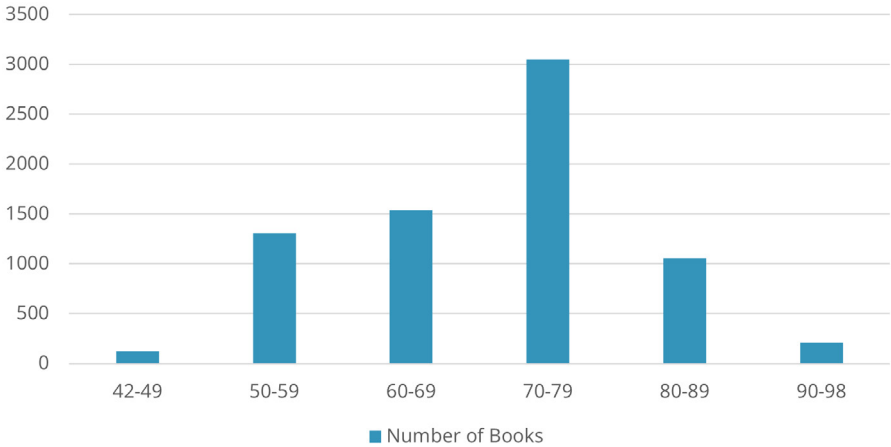
Ban Area Home Ownership Average vs. National Average



People in areas where bans have taken place over-index in home ownership versus the national average. Average ban area home ownership is 72.2%, while the national average is

65.9%. In ban areas, home ownership percentages range from 42.6% in Killeen, TX to 98.9% in Jefferson County, KY.

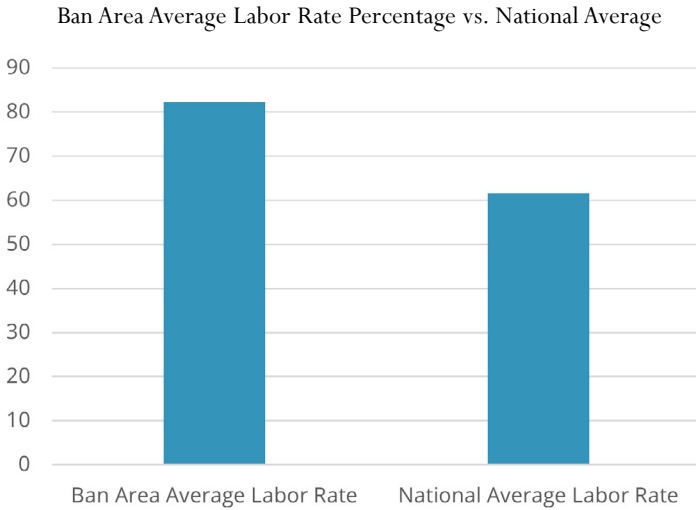
Number of Books Banned by Home Ownership



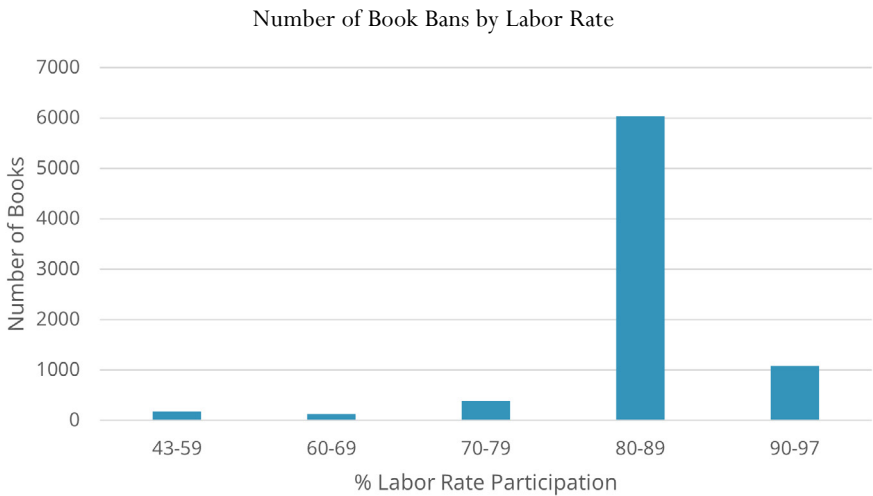
Over 3000 book titles were banned by people living in areas where 70-79% of people own their homes. This includes areas such as Wake County, NC, where 202 titles were challenged in 2021 and 2023; Frederick County, VA (130 titles); Granbury Independent School District in TX (131 titles) and Crawford County, PA (186 titles).

How does home ownership correlate with book banning? Property taxes from homeowners contribute to running public schools and public libraries. According to EveryLibrary, the third vector of a performative or politicized book challenge is “Classic anti-tax and anti-government movements.”³⁴ Generally, the anti-tax movement is as American as a hot dog. It is the cause of the Boston Tea Party, and is a reminder of the power of the people to hold the government accountable. There is absolutely nothing wrong with citizens wanting to know how their taxes will be spent. However, when citizens weaponize their status as a taxpayer, it can lead to a sense of ownership of the entities and services paid for by these taxes. This can give rise to blaming certain individuals or groups; hateful rhetoric; and the urge to control the content and materials that the taxpayer “bought” with “their money.”

Labor Force Participation



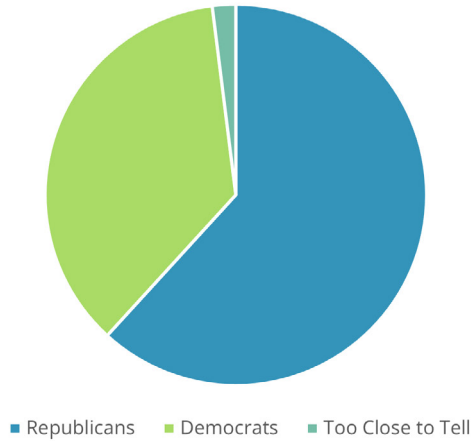
In areas where book bans have taken place, the average employment percentage is 82.3% versus the national average of 61.6%. Ban area employment percentages range from 43.1% in Gila County, AZ to 97% in Jefferson County, KY.



The highest number of book bans occurred in areas with an 80-89% rate of employment. This includes areas such as Lindbergh, MO, where 44 titles were challenged in 2021 and 2022; West De Pere, WI (10 titles); Nampa, ID (23 titles); and Murray City, UT (99 titles).

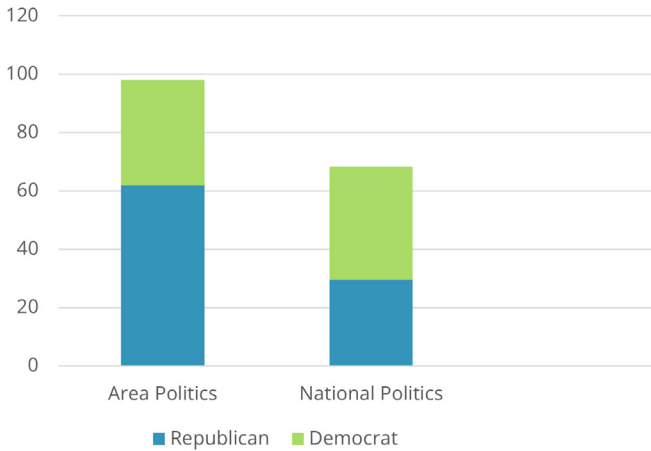
Politics and Political Affiliations

Politics of Counties with Book Bans



As a proxy for political affiliation, we looked at voting outcomes for the 2020 Presidential election at the county level. Counties that experienced book challenges consist of nearly 2/3 more Republicans than Democrats, at 62% and 36% respectively.

Ban County Politics vs. National Politics



In the nation as a whole, registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans 38.8% to 29.4%. Based on voting outcomes of the 2020 election at the county level, the opposite is true of ban counties, where Republicans outnumber Democrats 62% to 36%.

Case Studies

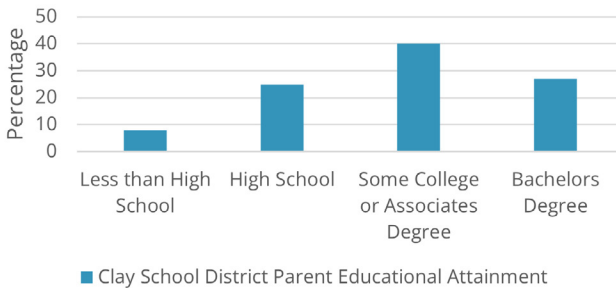
CASE STUDY: Clay County School District in Clay County, FL

Clay County is located in the northeastern part of Florida, along the St. John River. It is a rural county comprised of small towns. Its school district includes 52 schools, from elementary through high school.

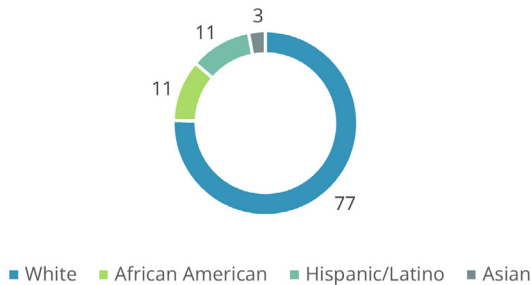
Florida has banned more books than any other state, and Clay County leads the state of Florida, with 627. Most of these books have been challenged by one person – Bruce Friedman, a member of the organization No Left Turn, whose mission is “To revive in American education the fundamental discipline of objective thinking by educating, empowering, and engaging students, parents, and community, emphasizing the role of the parent as the primary custodian and authority of their child.”⁵ In Florida, if a person asks for a book to be reviewed, it is immediately removed from shelves.⁶ In defiance of its scornful status as the most ban-happy county in the nation, the Clay School Board is doubling down, and has recently put 181 more titles on the list to be purged, decrying them as “filthy, filthy pornography.”⁷

Clay County School District by the Numbers

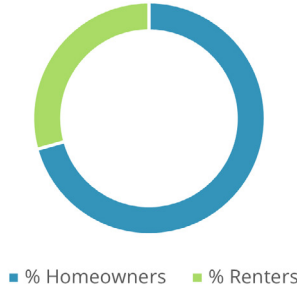
Clay School District Parent Educational Attainment



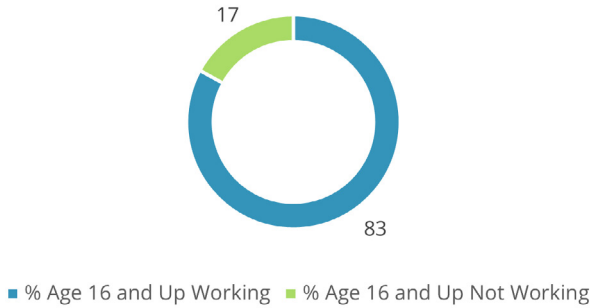
Clay School District Race/Ethnic Distribution



Clay School District Homeowners vs. Renters



Clay School District Labor Force Participation



CASE STUDY: North East Independent School District in Bexar County, TX

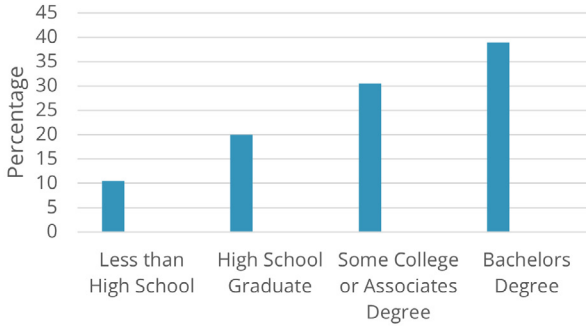
For the areas that are minority white, most books were challenged in areas that are 33-41% white. This includes North East Independent School District in Bexar County, Texas, where a total of 439 titles were challenged in 2021. Bexar County is in South Texas, just down Highway 35 from Texas’s capital, Austin. Its county seat is San Antonio, and it is part of the San Antonio-New Braunfels Metropolitan Statistical Area. The North East Independent School District (NEISD) includes 75 schools, from Pre-K through High School.

Late in 2021, NEISD pulled and reviewed 439 books for appropriateness based on a list of titles circulated to school districts by Republican State Representative Matt Krause.⁸ Krause, a founder of the Texas Freedom Caucus, issued his book list one month after he declared his intention to run for Texas Attorney General against embattled incumbent Ken Paxton. Krause’s list, a 16-page spreadsheet containing 850 titles, was accompanied by a letter demanding that school superintendents in Texas provide him with information on the number of copies of each book existing in their district and at which schools. He also demanded that superintendents inform him of any other titles in their schools that deal with sexual subjects and racial issues that “may make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress.” After the review, 119 titles were removed from the shelves in NEISD schools. A report by Hearst News found that NEISD led the state of Texas in the number of book bans.⁹ As a result,

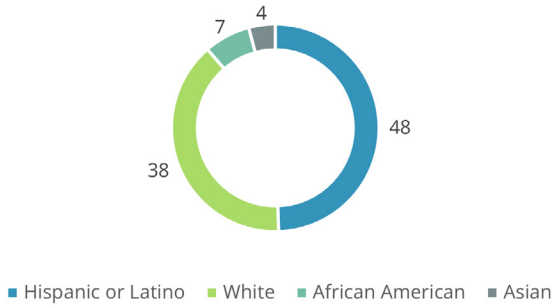
the school district was criticized by the ACLU and its own teacher’s union. The books remain off the shelves, and Rep. Krause has never divulged the source of his 16-page spreadsheet.

North East Independent School District by the Numbers

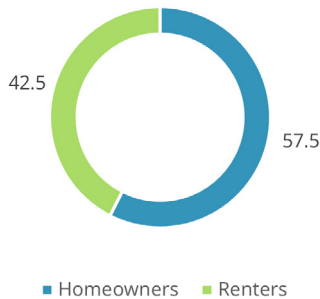
NEISD Parent Educational Attainment



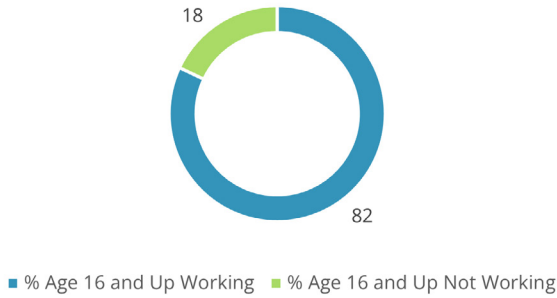
NEISD Race/Ethnicity Distribution



NEISD % Homeowners vs. Renters



NEISD Labor Force Participation



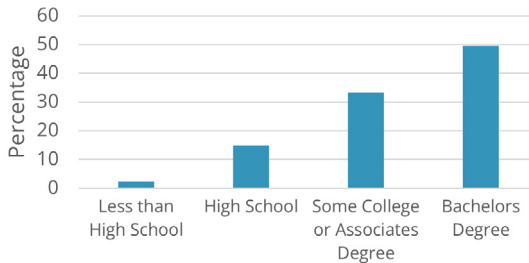
CASE STUDY: Wentzville School District in St. Charles County, MO

The Wentzville School District is in the third-most populous county in the state of Missouri. The school district includes 22 schools, and is about 45 minutes away from St. Louis.

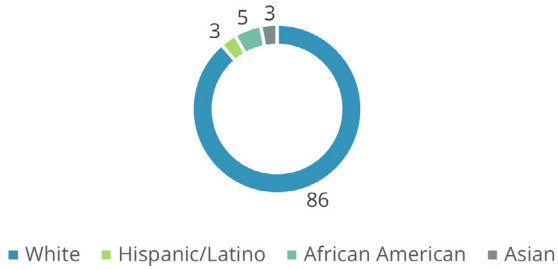
In August, 2022, SB 775¹⁰ went into effect. A particularly virulent law, it calls schools to remove any book considered sexually explicit, and makes breaking the law a class two misdemeanor, carrying a sentence of up to two years in jail and a fine of \$2,000. Following the law’s enactment, Wentzville School District’s board removed 228 books, over sexual content. The ACLU of Missouri filed suit against the school district on behalf of students and employees, resulting in 200 titles being reinstated to Wentzville school library shelves. 17 books still remain unavailable.¹¹

Wentzville by the Numbers

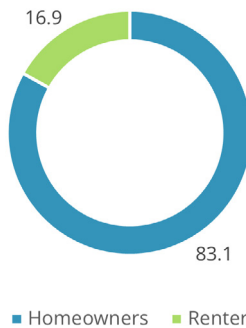
Wentzville School District Parent Educational Attainment



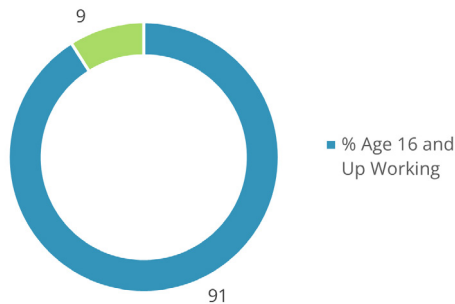
Wentzville School District Race/Ethnic Distribution



Wentzville School District Homeowners vs. Renters



Wentzville School District Labor Force Participation



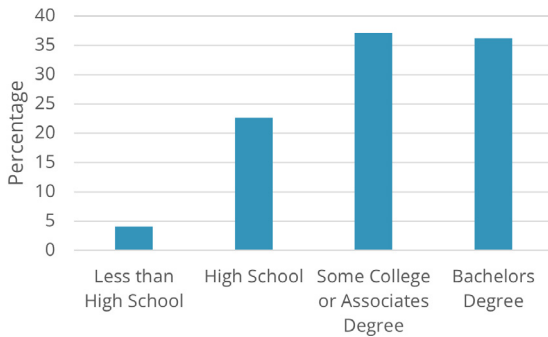
CASE STUDY: Murray City School District in Salt Lake County, UT

Murray is a suburb of Salt Lake City, located about 15 minutes outside of the city. It is in the core of Salt Lake County. In February, 2021, a third grade student brought a book from

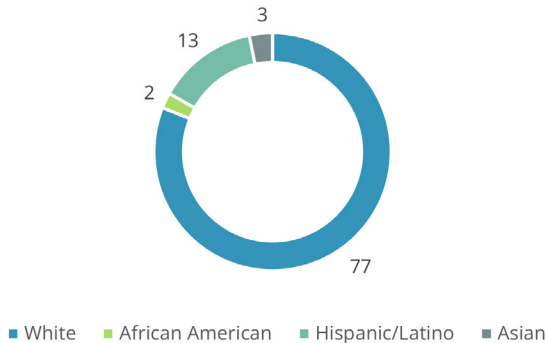
home to read aloud in class. The book, *Call Me Max*, by Kyle Lukoff, is about a transgender boy who answers questions about his identity. Reading the book aloud in class caused a backlash from parents, which then caused the school district to suspend their own program to broaden diversity in their district’s literacy choices.¹² Utah Parents United, a group of parents who oppose legislation that “undermines parents in policy and education,”¹³ reported on a group of 30 parents who “stood up for their beliefs” and sent a list of nearly 100 books to the Murray School Board. The books on the list, in the parents’ opinions, are “downright obscene and disgusting, contain graphic descriptions of rape, downplay pedophilia, encourage sexual obsession and pornography addiction, and groom children to question their gender.”¹⁴

Murray School District by the Numbers

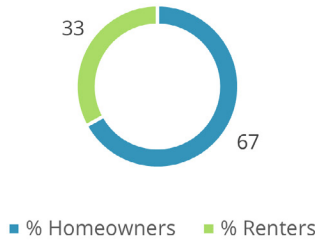
Murray School District Parent Educational Attainment



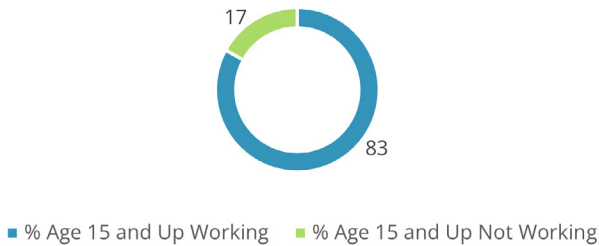
Murray School District Race/Ethnic Distribution



Murray School District Homeowners vs. Renters



Murray School District Labor Force Participation

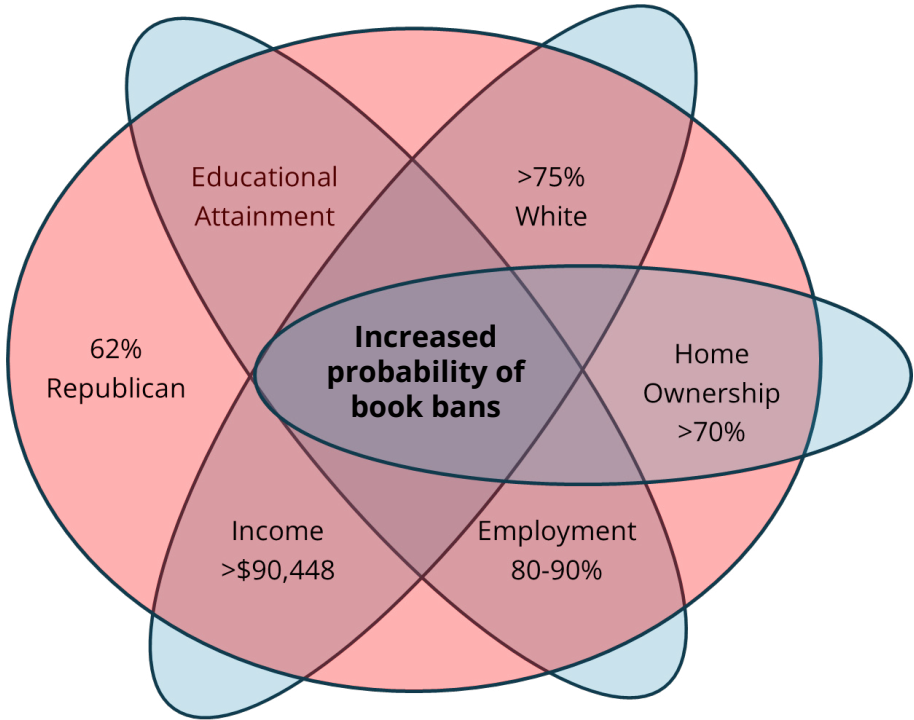


The Overlap of Demographics, Attitudes, and Behaviors

What Does the Demographic Data Teach Us About Book Bans?

Areas that experience book bans can be considered privileged¹⁵ areas. They are overwhelmingly white, rich, educated, and employed. These banning efforts are driven by an organized network of Parent’s Rights groups and political entities that claim to protect all children from what they see as threats from groups that support diversity and sex education. This can be tied to concepts like white fragility, white demographic decline and its associated fear, and intolerance of the LGBTQ lifestyle, both religious and otherwise.

Robin DiAngelo’s book, *White Fragility*, explains the defensiveness around race that white people exhibit. DiAngelo explains that although white people cannot handle racial discomfort, their defensiveness is weaponized in such a way as to maintain white racial control.¹⁶



This brings us to the concept of white victimhood, where white Republicans live in the fantasy that they are the ones who are oppressed. In a 2020 public opinion poll from the Public Religion Research Institute, 72% of Republicans completely or mostly agreed with the idea that discrimination against white people had become as big of a problem as discrimination against Black people. Only 22% of Democrats agreed.¹⁷

White victimhood has its roots in the fight against Reconstruction, and the desperation of whites to cling to power after the Civil War. Sadly, the rhetoric from that era echoes all-too-loudly today, exemplified in the Charlottesville march, when tiki-torch bearing white men chanted about not being ‘replaced.’ It echoes again when pundits like Tucker Carlson complain of whites being oppressed as a result of too much power being granted to people of color. We hear that familiar echo again when Fox News host Brian Kilmeade rants about minorities ‘trying to take down white culture,’ and when televangelist Pat Robertson predicts that America would be ‘over’ when ‘people of color rise up and overtake their oppressors.’¹⁸

It is, in a way, shocking that these statements were made just two years ago. But, two years ago is when book banning began escalating in earnest. It’s no wonder that the NAACP views book bans as “an act of policy violence promoting anti-Blackness”. As Dr. Phelton Moss asserts, “For years, this country has successfully worked to pass violent laws to maintain a permanent caste system to include an illiterate fraction of Black people through the passage of Jim Crow laws and literacy tests to ensure Black people could never pick up a book — much less read it to know their history. Today’s book bans join the growing list of anti-black violence by

a dwindling majority, insistent on keeping Black children from learning the factually accurate history of racism, prejudice, and oppression in America.”¹⁹

Studies show that when whites are prompted to think about losing their position as the majority, it creates a feeling of “status threat”, which then impacts their political ideology²⁰. For example, a 2014 study by psychologists Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson found that this status threat can lead to a greater endorsement of conservative views.²¹ And it doesn’t stop at mere views. It goes further, unfortunately, deviating into attitudes that are at odds with the very principles of democracy. 2020 research by Vanderbilt sociology and public policy professor Larry Bartels shows that feelings of ethnic antagonism—that is, perceptions of unfair preferential treatment of immigrants and people of color—drives white Republicans to embrace anti-democratic sentiments. These sentiments are, by now, familiar to us all. They include taking the law into one’s own hands, and the approval of political violence to maintain what they consider to be the ‘traditional American way of life’.²² Unfortunately, theirs is a tradition that marginalizes everyone who doesn’t think, look, or act exactly like them.

While the Parents’ Rights Movement claims to crusade in defense of all children, their true goal is to protect only white cisgender children. As UCLA law professor LaToya Baldwin Clark writes in the *Yale Law Journal*, “White parents, in particular, fight for resources to reproduce their status—including their racial status—in their children. This racial privilege is valuable not only to children but to the group. All Whites benefit from the work of White parents to control education.”²³

In 2022, Human Rights Campaign noted a 400% surge in anti-LGBT “grooming” content on social media, in the month following Florida’s passing of the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. The study found that “‘Grooming’ rhetoric is being spread by a small group of radical extremists as part of a coordinated and concerted effort to attack LGBTQ+ kids, and to rile up extreme members of their base, the only voting bloc they are moving on these issues, ahead of the midterm elections.”²⁴ GLAAD’s 2023 Social Media Safety Index found that the increase of hateful anti-LGBTQ rhetoric on social media translates to offline harms.²⁵ Banning LGBTQ books from schools and libraries is one of those offline harms. A direct example can be seen in Iowa, where *This Book is Gay* was removed from Iowa City Community School Districts after a spate of bomb threats. The bomb threats followed a Twitter blast from Libs of TikTok, saying that the book “promotes gay sex and encouraged the use of sex apps.” This Twitter blast also mentioned school districts in Rochester, NY, where a similar bomb threat prompted that school’s evacuation.²⁶

In a similar set of incidents, PEN America found that the banning of 58 books in Walton County, Florida was based on a misleading “Porn in Schools Report,” which was emailed to the county’s school superintendent. The report, which originated from the Florida Citizen Alliance, provides a list of books touching on sexual activity, sexual assault, and LGBTQ identities. Even though the criteria to remove these books lack legal arguments that would make them unsuitable for school curriculum, the superintendent removed the books anyway, without actually reading them. This illustrates what PEN calls “An alarming influence of fringe groups on educational censorship.”²⁷

Research by Paul T. Jaeger, a professor at the Maryland College of Information Studies and others, found that “Censorship is an act of control, driven by a combustible mix of power, privilege, and fear,” and that the most important driver of censorship is fear. “[Censorship] is an act of fear perpetuated by the fear that society is changing, the fear that these changes will erode existing privilege and challenge majority beliefs, the fear of people with different cultures and experiences, the fear of having to live in a different world.”²⁸

Based on the demographics of the areas where banning has occurred, these efforts appear as a frenzied attempt for the privileged class to protect themselves and their children from the creeping influence of a feared minority. The fact that book bans do not only affect their own children doesn't seem to matter. In fact, they win if people in their circles are simply made aware of—and kept scared of—these books, even if they are not removed from libraries or curriculum. Now, these items are on an actual list of concerning materials, circulated around the Internet, amplified by social media, causing concern for every parent in the nation. Their goal has been achieved.

On the Horizon – What Happens Next?

Despite the fact that PEN and ALA both report the highest-ever count of book challenges in 2022, there is no indication that efforts to ban have peaked, or is dying down. On the contrary, efforts are ongoing and continue unabated. This will affect education and librarianship in the following ways:

- A “whitewashing of education,” and an “empathy gap”²⁹ for students: Without access to materials and stories about marginalized people, there is a risk that students will be exposed to harmful stereotypes and narratives. If students are deprived of learning about people and cultures different from their own, they will not learn empathy. The implications of this are dire – a deeply divided future population marked by increased violence.
- Minority populations will be deprived of materials that they can relate to and see themselves reflected in³⁰, leading to added marginalization, and opening the door further to racism and hate crimes.³¹
- An increase³² in librarians fleeing the occupation³³: With more public library boards and boards of education being given carte blanche to make decisions about what belongs in collections, and some librarians even sustaining ad hominem attacks³⁴, or flat-out firing³⁵ for not toeing the line, librarians will leave public and school libraries. This “brain drain” will result in public libraries being staffed by paraprofessionals and/or less experienced librarians, leaving libraries open to easier control and manipulation tactics by rogue boards. School libraries, if they still exist³⁶, will be staffed by parent volunteers, or not at all.
- Public libraries will close: Some public libraries have already been defunded³⁷ over book banning. We can expect to see more of this as banning continues.

Research from EveryLibrary found that Texans can expect to pay around \$3.6 Million to ban books; Florida's costs come to between \$34,000 and \$135,000 per library or school per year; in Missouri, taxpayers can expect to pay 10% of a school district's per-student expenditures on banning just one book.³⁸ What a waste of time³⁹ and money – not only for the professionals employed by schools and libraries, but for tax-paying citizens as well. Nevertheless, this approach has proven successful, even though people opposed to book bans pay taxes as well, and have just as much of a right to voice their opinions about curriculum content and library collections.

Notes on Our Methodology

We took data on book bans compiled by Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson⁴⁰ (available through the EveryLibrary Institute) and distilled it down to the total number of book titles banned per school district, or, if a public library was targeted, per county. Based on this distilled spreadsheet, we searched the National Center for Education Statistics, which provides a Demographics Dashboard based on the US Census for each school district⁴¹. For bans targeting public libraries, we relied on demographic data from the US Census' County Profiles⁴², which display data gathered from their American Community Survey⁴³. In addition, the US Census and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics provided national averages and medians, against which we compared the book ban area data.

The political data was gathered from the county-level outcomes of the 2020 presidential election using an interactive map of the United States published by *USA Today*, which analyzed election data from MIT and Associated Press election results. Although this data pre-dates the 2021 increase in book banning, we use this as a proxy for political party registration data, which is not kept by the US Census. After the data was compiled, we analyzed patterns and trends and teased out commonalities with recent scholarly research and literature.

Definitions of Demographic Data

- Educational attainment: The percentage of people who have earned bachelor's degrees⁴⁴
- Percentage White: The percentage of people who identify as non-Hispanic white⁴⁵
- Labor Force Participation: The percentage of civilians over the age of 16 who are working⁴⁶
- Income: Median household income⁴⁷
- Homeowner: The percentage of owner-occupied housing⁴⁸
- Politics: County 2020 Presidential Election outcomes by party majority⁴⁹

A Note on Semantics – Book Bans? Book Challenges?

Some people⁵⁰ are quick to note that just because books are *challenged* (i.e. brought to the attention of a school or library board for reconsideration), does not automatically mean that they are *banned* (i.e. removed from a collection or curriculum). However, we view any challenge as an attempt to censor, whether or not that item is removed from circulation. Just because a challenged item may ultimately be retained in a collection does not mean that item was never challenged. Also, some institutions may remove items from shelves while they are under consideration, which for that time keeps them inaccessible, and is therefore censorship. Finally, some institutions may retain challenged items in their collections, but move them to other areas where they are less likely to be encountered. This is also considered censorship, because it makes these items more difficult to find. Therefore, we use the terms “ban” and “challenge” interchangeably in this report, and deem *any* action against a book as censorship, and part of an effort to bring about an outright removal of that material. As such, the dramatic increase in these efforts over the past three years should ring the alarm bell for all Americans concerned about the current and future state of democracy in this country.

Number of Books

This report counts the number of individual titles in every book ban effort. The number of challenged individual titles ranges from one to 626. The majority of book challenges in this dataset are only one title. Because of the way we count individual titles, and look at actions against books, our data may be different from organizations such as the ALA⁵¹ or PEN America⁵², who use different criteria to count bans and challenges.

Endnotes

- 1 Wordsrated; Global Book Banning Statistics; April 14, 2023.
- 2 International Journal of Educational Development; Education and Political Engagement; Kien Le and My Nguen; September 2021.
- 3 Journal of Experimental Psychology; The Role of Political Devotion in Sharing Partisan Misinformation and Resistance to Fact-Checking; Clara Pretus et al.; September, 2023.
- 4 EveryLibrary; Censors Playbook, Part 1 – Louisiana Libraries Association; John Chrastka; 2023.
- 5 No Left Turn; About: Mission, Goals, and Objectives; Retrieved October 4, 2023.
- 6 First Coast News; Clay County Schools Have Most Banned Books of any District in U.S.; September 25, 2025.
- 7 First Coast News; Clay County Leads the Nation in Banned Books. It May Ban Thousands More; Anne Schindler; September 28, 2023.
- 8 San Antonio Current; Texas GOP Lawmaker Starts Probe into Schools' 'Objectionable' Books Dealing with Race, Gender; Sanford Nowlin; October 26, 2021.
- 9 San Antonio Current; San Antonio's North East ISD Banned More Books than Any Other Texas School District, Report Shows; Sanford Nowlin; August 12, 2022.
- 10 LegiScan; Missouri Senate Bill 775; June 30, 2022.
- 11 PEN America; Good News that Wentzville School District Returns 200 Temporarily Banned Books to Shelves but PEN America Raises Concern that 17 Removed Books are Still Inaccessible; December 22, 2022.
- 12 The Salt Lake Tribune; Utah Parents Complained After Kids Were Read a Story About a Transgender Boy. Now Other Diverse Books are On Hold; Courtney Tanner; February 12, 2021.
- 13 Utah Parents United; About Us; Retrieved October 4, 2023.
- 14 Utah Parents United; 100 Books in Question in Murray; December 8, 2021.
- 15 Encyclopedia of Social Work; Privilege; Ovita F. Williams and Cheryl L. Franks; November 29, 2021.
- 16 RobinDiAngelo.com; August 2018 Interview; Retrieved September 29, 2023.
- 17 FiveThirtyEight; How White Victimhood Fuels Republican Politics, Alex Samuels and Neil Lewis, Jr.; March 21, 2022.
- 18 The Atlantic; 3 Tropes of White Victimhood; Lawrence Glickman; July 20, 2021.
- 19 NAACP; Book Bans: An Act of Policy Violence Promoting Anti-blackness; Dr. Phelton Moss; May 15, 2023.

- 20 University of Chicago Law Review; A Demographic Moral Panic: Fears of a Majority-Minority Future and the Deprecating Value of Whiteness; Brittany Farr; August 16, 2021.
- 21 Psychological Science; On the Precipice of a “Majority Minority” America: Perceived Status Threat from the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans’ Political Ideology; Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson; April 3, 2014.
- 22 PNAS, Ethnic Antagonism Erodes Republicans’ Commitment to Democracy, Larry Bartels, August 31, 2020.
- 23 Yale Law Journal, The Critical Racialization of Parents’ Rights, LaToya Baldwin Clark; May 2023.
- 24 Human Rights Campaign; NEW REPORT: Anti-LGBTQ+ Grooming Narrative Surged More Than 400% on Social Media Following Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay or Trans’ Law, As Social Platforms Enabled Extremist Politicians and their Allies to Peddle Inflammatory, Discriminatory Rhetoric; August 10, 2022.
- 25 GLAAD; GLAAD’s Third Annual Social Media Safety Index Shows All Five Major Social Media Platforms Fail on LGBTQ Safety and Underscores How Online Hate and Misinformation Manifest Into Real-World Harm for LGBTQ People; June 15, 2023.
- 26 Iowa Press Citizen, After Bomb Threats, Iowa City School District Removes Book Targeted by Anti-LGBTQ Twitter Account; Paris Barraza, March 30, 2023.
- 27 PEN America; Book Banning in Walton County Based on Misleading “Porn In Schools Report” Illustrates Alarming Influence of Fringe Groups on Educational Censorship; April 29, 2022.
- 28 The Political Librarian; The Urge to Censor: Raw Power, Social Control, and the Criminalization of Librarianship; Paul T. Jaeger et al. Spring 2023.
- 29 Education Week. Parents’ Rights Groups Have Mobilized. What Does it Mean for Students? August 31, 2023.
- 30 Teachers College at Columbia University; What You Need to Know About the Book Bans Sweeping the U.S.; Alex Eble et al.; September 2023.
- 31 ACLED; Update | Fact Sheet: Anti-LGBT+ Mobilization in the United States; Sam Jones and Roudabeh Kishi; November 23, 2022.
- 32 Salon; When they Came for the Librarians; Gretchen Corsillo; August 4, 2022.
- 33 School Library Journal; Stress Tested: These School Librarians Hit the Breaking Point. Here’s How They Moved On; Jess deCourcy Hines; May 2, 2023.
- 34 Independent; The School Librarian in the Middle of Louisiana’s War on Libraries; Alex Woodward; April 24, 2023.
- 35 KXAN; Llano County Librarian Loses Job After Not Removing Books; March 18, 2022.
- 36 NBC News; Some Houston School Libraries Will Become Disciplinary Spaces; August 1, 2023.
- 37 Vox; The Rising Republican Movement to Defund Public Libraries; Fabiola Cineas; May 8, 2023.
- 38 EveryLibrary; The Taxpayers’ Rising Financial Burden of Banning Books; September 21, 2023.
- 39 EveryLibrary; Parent Perceptions Survey 2023; Fall 2023.
- 40 Magnusson, Tasslyn; Censorship Attacks: Tracking Book Challenges and Bans in America; Current and Ongoing; 2021-2023.
- 41 National Center for Education Statistics; Public School Districts Search; 2016-2021.
- 42 United States Census Bureau; Data Explorer County Profiles American Community Survey Estimates; 2021.

- 43 United States Census Bureau; About the American Community Survey; June 23, 2023.
- 44 United States Census Bureau; Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data; February 16, 2023.
- 45 United States Census Bureau; Quick Facts: United States; July 1, 2022.
- 46 United States Bureau of Labor Statistics; Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate; Updated Monthly.
- 47 United States Census Bureau; Income in the United States: 2022.
- 48 United States Census Bureau; Quarterly Residential Vacancies and Homeownership, Second Quarter 2023; August 2, 2023.
- 49 USA Today; Four Maps that Show How America Voted in the 2020 Election With Results by County, Number of Voters; November 10, 2020.
- 50 American Enterprise Institute; Don't Worry About 'Book Bans'; Max Eden and Jay P. Green; September 18, 2023.
- 51 ALA; Book Ban Data Methodology; March 22, 2023.
- 52 PEN America; Banned in the USA Report Methodology; September 19, 2022.

Reflections and Advice on Running an Informational Millage Campaign

ANONYMOUS

ABSTRACT

This article outlines a step-by-step strategy of how to run an informational millage campaign. It includes advice and lessons learned.

On August 8, 2023, I knew one thing for certain: At the end of the night, I was getting a drink.

A strong one.

What I did not know was whether that drink would be in victory or defeat.

August 8, 2023, was the day voters in my county decided my library's fate: Would they vote to extend our property tax – the *only* dedicated funding for the system – or would they reject it and force us to come back at a lower rate?

This vote had been the one thing on my mind since taking over communications for the system three months prior. Though it was never implicitly stated, I knew getting this tax passed was *the* reason I was hired.

Worrying about the vote was unfamiliar territory for the library system. The millage was approved in the 1990s, and voters overwhelmingly supported it every time it came up for renewal. Historically, the system was seen as one of the treasures of the county, and the public was proud to defend it, use it, and fund it.

And out of nowhere, everything changed.

The library system and county became engulfed in the book content debate, leading to hours-long board meetings, increased oversight from elected officials, exaggerated truths, and misinformation that bordered on dishonesty.

This change occurred about a year before the vote, damaging all the goodwill the system had earned over several decades – in which it grew from a rural library housed in a small room to an award-winning system spanning multiple state-of-the-art branches.

On August 8, 2023, we would learn just *how* damaged.

This article will not be a foolproof plan list of how to run an informational millage campaign. All I can give is my system's experience passing (yes, it passed!) a millage in contentious times. Our strategies may not work for you, and you may have other ideas of your own.

But in my view, the most important takeaway from this article is knowing that, even if it doesn't seem like it, library support still outweighs the loud (oftentimes *much* louder) opposition.

Even if your library is in a hostile environment. Even if all you can legally do is inform people of the vote and hope they see your library's value enough to go out and vote on your behalf. Even if you don't have a fundraising group that can buy signs, billboards, and ads asking people to vote "yes." Even if all you see on social media is negativity and lies.

Even if everything seems to be working against you, your supporters are still out there, and they want to show their support.

Our system is proof.

Start Early, Present the Facts, Know Your Public

Before accepting the library's communications position, I had zero experience in a library's communications position.

That meant I also had zero experience organizing an informational millage campaign.

While it can be hard to accept not knowing something – especially when that *something* can influence the lives of 100 coworkers and thousands of library users – for me, it brought clarity.

I quickly realized (after trying and failing spectacularly) that I did *not* have to reinvent the wheel for our campaign, because I had *not* been the first person to run one. All I had to do was get advice from those who had done it before.

I did, however, have a deep understanding of the issues the system faced, having followed the local politics for several years. So I knew who the players were, what groups to speak with, what issues we faced, and what questions I needed to be able to answer.

So, this is my first piece of advice: *Understand what you know, know it well, and know who to call for the things you don't know.*

In the initial stages, I had numerous talks with other communications directors and government officials who had tried to pass taxes in previous years. Though their situations were different than mine, the main takeaways from those conversations can be narrowed down to three basic tips:

- It's never too early to start alerting the public
- Give plenty of facts, but NEVER give an opinion
- Gauge the public with polling and survey

These conversations occurred about three months before the vote, and during those talks, I discovered that many people – *including* our supporters – were unaware that our millage was even on the ballot. You can have all the supporters in the world, but if they don't know the tax renewal is on the ballot, they aren't going to the polls.

We immediately set out to change that, which brings up another piece of advice: *If you're afraid of starting too early, don't be.* When it comes to anything regarding politics or taxes, every email, every public meeting, every social media post, and every interaction counts. And the more time you give yourself, the more opportunities you'll have to disseminate information.

Had we known what we know now, we would've started informing the public as soon as we knew it would be on the ballot – not less than 12 weeks before.

So, we started informing the public, and that began with a simple survey asking patrons a few basic questions:

- Were they aware the library's millage was on the ballot?
- Were they aware this funded everything the system offers?
- Were they aware of everything their library offers?

- Did they believe the library was a good steward of public funds?

The last two questions are just as important as the first two. If they answered “no” to the last two, they were more likely to answer “no” on the first two – and more likely to answer “no” on their ballot. We also asked them to leave comments on anything they wished regarding the library. We found out that, among our patrons, we still had a stellar reputation – something library systems need to remember to avoid getting swept up in the backlash that can proliferate online.

After the patron survey, we polled the general public with identical questions. We learned that 3 out of every 4 respondents had at least a “favorable” view of the system – another reminder that things weren’t all doom and gloom.

Another piece of advice: There is value in gauging both library users *and* the general public. It is important to remember (and unfortunately, this gets lost at times), that libraries are for *all* people, meaning we must understand what *all* people think about and want from their library – even those who don’t use the library or who oppose it. Libraries are supposed to be above the fray.

Next, we had to determine *how* to inform the public. What sort of information should we provide? How should that information be presented? Where should that information be found?

And as a publicly funded institution, there were certain things we could not do, mainly: We could NEVER tell people how to vote. That is the *most* important thing to remember.

Again, I had to ask these questions to others who knew better than me, only this time I contacted more people. Along with the PIOs and government officials I had spoken with before, I connected with EveryLibrary, which gave me a blueprint to follow.

Or more accurately, *many* blueprints to follow.

EveryLibrary sent me a plethora of sample flyers, pamphlets, posters, infographics, and other materials from dozens of other millage campaigns. I spent multiple days searching through each document, saving the ones that were applicable for us. Many of those documents contained information I had not considered providing, such as:

- System-wide stats over the previous year, pertaining to circulation, program attendance, Internet usage, etc.
- System-wide stats from the previous decade
- How much a property tax would cost homeowners based on their home’s value
- Annual budgets and how taxpayer money is spent
- The economic benefits patrons enjoy because of the library
- Future goals

For someone who was new at this, discovering these previous campaigns was like finding buried treasure. Again, I did *not* have to reinvent the wheel. I just had to create a script using snippets of what others had written.

Which brings me to another tip: *It’s okay to look to others for guidance.* We are ALL in this together.

Be Transparent, Honest, and Willing To Answer Any Questions From Any Person

After conducting our surveys and determining what parts of other campaigns we wanted to emulate, we started presenting information wherever we could. That began with creating a page on our website dedicated to the millage.

This page was divided into multiple sections, such as:

- **A sample ballot.** We wanted the public to see exactly what they'd see on the ballot.
- **What a “yes” vote means and what a “no” means.** We wanted the public to understand exactly what each vote meant *as well as* how each outcome of the vote would affect the library. We wanted it to be as easy to understand as possible.
- **FAQs.** We brainstormed questions people might have and answered them, then we added more questions as more came in.
- **The library's mission and vision statements.** We wanted people to see what our commitment to the community was.
- **The library's history, stats, accomplishments, and plans.** We wanted people to see everything their library had done and planned to do. It was important for people to see how their tax dollars were spent.
- **Ways to contact us.** We wanted people to be able to contact us with any questions they had. (As an aside, I put my name, work email, and office number in this section, because I wanted to be the one answering those questions. It builds better trust when people see a person to contact instead of a position or building.) This section also contained a schedule of public meetings we had to explain the millage.

Here's another piece of advice: *Put all your initial effort and focus into creating this webpage.* This is the place where you'll house all the information for press releases, talking points, social media posts, and emails. Once you have all the information you think is relevant on this page, all you'll have to do after is pull from it.

And here's another piece of advice: *Make sure this webpage is highly visible on your website, ideally on your homepage.* You want as many people to see it as possible.

Once the webpage was made, we began visiting local councils, boards, non-profits, and other entities to present information on the millage. Most of these meetings were livestreamed, so in my mind, this was free publicity to talk about the library's great services and remind more people of the impending vote.

Next piece of advice: *You must put yourself out there, otherwise you're relying on people to come find you for information.*

At each meeting, we gave a short presentation, handed out flyers and informational packets, passed around a QR code to our millage webpage, and answered questions. We stayed after each meeting and answered more questions, whether they came from elected officials or those in attendance.

And our message in these meetings stayed consistent: We wanted people to fully understand what their vote meant and what the millage (or their tax dollars) was used for. How they voted was not our concern. I told countless people that my job was *not* to convince them how to vote: It was to make sure they had all the necessary and accurate information before making their vote.

Inside our libraries, we made sure information was available, but we kept from going overboard. We had a flyer displayed in one or two spots in our branches, we had a QR code flyer at the front circulation desks, and we gave away small handouts when people checked out items, but that was about it.

In my mind, the importance of the vote could *not* trump the importance of the library itself. Our biggest selling point (and the biggest selling point for *any* library system) are the services offered to the public. Nothing replaces that.

On that same note, we made sure our social media posts and emails did the same: We regularly, though not frequently, reminded people of the vote, but we made sure we constantly highlighted all the great services we offer. Numerically, up to two posts a week were tax-related (usually just one), while the other 15 or so were about the library itself. I sent out two emails regarding the vote in a two-month span.

Another piece of advice on social media: *It can be helpful, and it can be hurtful. Let it be helpful.* For me, this was the best place to find out what issues I needed to be ready to address, because this is where people let you know exactly how they feel. So, we scoured every post, comment, and message we could find, negative or positive, to better understand how people were feeling about the library.

Stay Positive and Don't Get Defeated Before the Results Come In

On the day of the vote, I met my directors at one of our branches where we planned to await the results. An hour or so before the polls closed, I typed up two brief statements, one for each outcome.

Dispirited, one of them looked at me and said, "Don't worry about the victory one. I've already accepted this is not going to pass."

He wasn't the only one thinking that way. Our millage was the only county-wide item on the ballot, and things had gotten rough in the week leading to the vote. The negativity on social media reached its crescendo, and it was impossible to ignore. Here's a sample of some of the lies people spread:

- The library had porn available to kids.
- The library mismanaged its funds.
- The library had millions in another bank account.
- No one used the library.
- The library could survive on half of what it got.

And to make matters worse: Some of the commentators were either in public office, had run for public office, or were direct representatives of someone in public office, so their words *meant* something. Among our leadership and staff, morale was as low as it had ever been.

After the polls closed, we waited about two hours for the final results. It was the longest, most stressful two-hour stretch of my life.

Early voting results came first, and they had us slightly ahead, 51 percent to 49 percent. As more precincts reported their results, our lead grew, at one point reaching 54 percent. For the first time in weeks, we felt optimistic.

Then our lead slowly shrank. With each new precinct, our advantage became smaller and smaller. I can't imagine how many times I hit refresh on my laptop. I just know that my index finger felt raw for days. At one point, our lead got down to less than 100 votes. I texted my wife, "This is going to fail."

Though I hate being wrong, this was one instance I'm glad I was. It didn't fail. It barely passed, but passed nonetheless. Of all the taxes on the ballot in our county in 2023, the library's tax was the *only* one that passed. It was something *no one* thought was possible.

About an hour after the polls closed, I sat alone at a bar, enjoying my celebratory drink.

Never Forget: Your Supporters Are Out There

Again, this article is not foolproof. And even though our tax passed, it *narrowly* passed, so perhaps we could've done things differently to get better results.

But the main takeaway is this: No matter the challenges your library system is facing, you still have supporters out there. And though they're quieter, they outnumber the detractors, even if it doesn't seem like it.

Our library was embroiled in the book content debate for more than a year leading up to the vote. Had everything been based on social media chatter, we would've lost the vote, *spectacularly*.

But our supporters did show up, and against all odds, our funding was secured for another decade.

I'll drink to that.

Book Banning and Censorship Are Only Symptoms: Lessons Learned from Personal History

EWA DZIEDZIC-ELLIOTT

ABSTRACT

We all have done something to push against censorship in most recent years, whether it was to sign a petition, write an op ed, attend board meetings or help organize the local community. We believe, and try to convince others, that censorship is bad. In this piece I offer a retrospective comparison from 20th century history, painting a picture of long-term consequences of decades long censorship.

I had an unusual childhood.

When I was about 6 years old, my mom went back to school to become a librarian. There wouldn't be anything special in this story if it wasn't for the fact that she not only had to create the whole collection, design the space, buy furniture, set up the cataloging, inventory and everything else that comes with opening a new library but also provide the space for it in our house. My family ended up living above the library for nearly a decade.

I remember the smell: wood, books, paper, and the tea and cookies that my mom always hid from me and my siblings in her desk.

I remember learning the alphabet by organizing her library patrons' cards. And the numerical order by placing book cards in the right order. Helping her shelve the books at the end of the day or copying cataloging cards when my handwriting was good enough for this big job, were my regular chores.

The main room of the library with the librarian's desk, tables, chairs and children's books was always busy. There were neighbors stopping down to grab the daily paper, romance readers picking up the latest editions of Harlequins (!), the works of Barbara Cartland or Danielle Steel, adventure lovers checking out Karol May, Robert Ludlum, and kids reading Anne of Green Gables. As you can see, we were not reading New York Times bestsellers but instead wanted to know about the newly available world outside of the Cold War zone. Summer was always the busiest. Kids bored out of their minds reading and reading and reading amongst the tall stacks of books that we had to help put away at the end of each day.

The second room of the library was quieter with more academic level books organized in a similar fashion to our Dewey decimal system. My favorite section was poetry and drama, especially late 18th and early 19th century romantics, the well-known ones like Goethe or Byron and more local ones such as Mickiewicz, Slowacki or Norwid, and even Pushkin.

I remember standing in the second room of the library and looking at dozens and dozens of volumes of Lenin books and asking the librarian, my mom, why does she need those books if nobody reads them. She said they came to the library as a donation when the library first opened in 1987 and she must keep them. It was the transition time from communism to democracy in 1989, when she didn't know who had the power to tell her what the collection must consist of. I would ask her when she would finally be brave enough to get rid of them.

The life of the library took a very different turn after the fall of communism and the first free elections in Poland occurred in 1990. I remember my mom whispering with other adults in the library about what they hoped for, what kind of changes they were expecting, how and what will change for all of us.

The change came to us and to our little library in the form of a color TV with a VHS player. You read that right, it was the 1990s and the library received one of the first color TV's with a VHS player in town. At the time, I didn't think anything of it. I assumed that it was new technology that everybody was getting at the same time. I had no idea that in other parts of the world that level of technology was common. I didn't realize until 1989 that western culture was prohibited in Poland.

Before we received the new equipment, we used to watch stories using slide projectors, but now we had a movie night every Friday. My mom would take a bus to the bigger city nearby and rent VHS tapes for us. Even though the library hours were Monday-Saturday, on Sundays she would open the library for teens and let them bring their own movies. It was mostly teenage boys watching action and martial arts movies that finally were available and allowed in post-communist Poland. I didn't understand the significance of having kung fu movies in our small library.

Those changes in Polish politics were also heavily marked in my elementary school. I will never forget sitting in my 4th grade history class and listening to my teacher sayings that we are the first generation, one of the first classes, that will be taught the real Polish history. That this is the first time ever in her career that she can speak freely in the classroom about the country's past without being afraid that her students, or their parents, might be communist spies and she might face persecution.

I also didn't understand my parents' excitement when English was offered as a private Saturday class in my elementary school. Those who could afford it and believed in their children's education, paid for us to learn our first words in English in the early 1990s. The classes were very popular, the teacher had two sessions with younger and older students. It was a status symbol to be one of the children taking English classes.

Hanging the cross on the walls of our school was a symbol of freedom, a symbol of victory against a communist regime that didn't allow religion in the lives of the members of the party or even the employees of the federal or local government (there are a lot of stories about people getting married at the church or baptizing their children as a sign of rebellion against the government and not a proof of their faith). The story of church and politics in 20th century Poland is very, very complicated and has little to do with religion, and a lot to do with power and control over the masses.

I remember the exhibit of Katyn¹ that was placed in the history classroom for the first time ever. For the first time in over 40 years we were allowed to be taught about the events of the massacre of Polish officers during WWII by the Russians.

¹ See: Katyn Massacre: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Katyn-Massacre>

But what really shook my world was going to high school in the mid 1990s and discovering the depth of misinformation that was spread among the older generation due to censorship in their textbooks. I remember heated debates with elders or peers who were heavily influenced by the elders, about the modern 20th century history and the way they were introduced in my textbooks vs. the textbooks written before 1989.

At first those debates were part of my household conversations as well, until my dad started to read history books that were coming out. He had a deep knowledge of historical events in our area, knew where the underground army was stationed, what battles took place and corrected the errors in his education with uncensored and well researched books published before 1989. Being myself a librarian, to this day I have issues trusting resources published in or about the Communist Bloc.

And then there were my grandparents' stories. Those were the most painful to listen to because they were firsthand WWII stories that they were never comfortable sharing. Our town was invaded and taken over several times by German and Russian armies, but until now they never could say anything negative about the Russians. Between 1946-1989 everything that went wrong in Poland was blamed by the officials on Germans, Jews and Freemasons.

Now we could freely speak of the communist regime, the plants in our government, and most importantly about the fear. Fear of someone listening to you, spying on you, trying to accuse you of something, being part of the party or in any way being someone tied to it.

Unlike many American schools, the Polish educational school system teaches history and literature chronologically: you start in antiquity and end up in modern times. I was a junior or senior in high school when we started to learn about modern history and literature in depth. You already know I loved the romantics (they were in sophomore class). The 19th century Romantics usually introduce us to protagonists who are unhappily in love with someone unreachable, often married or engaged to someone else. The romantic love is unrealistic, tragic and miserable, often ending in suicide or an attempt at suicide, all out of love. But add another layer of history to that "romantic" love and you will see a trapped door with another layer: love of freedom, independence, ethnic cultures, languages, traditions and anti-censorship. Polish protagonists in romantic literature are often immigrants who are forced to escape their motherland in order to continue the fight for its freedom. If you take a look at the history of Europe, you will realize that Central and Eastern Europeans had a pretty good idea how to fight against a long-term occupant even before 1945.

In my humble opinion this need to fight for freedom became the structure that was needed to fight the communist government in post WWII.

And we fought. In and outside of the country. Banned authors traveled to other parts of the world and continued telling their truth about gulags (work camps), the fear tactics, immobilizing the society by intentional lack of access to education, and censorship of media, literature, music and culture all together.

They even made attempts to dumb down the population by glorifying physical laborers and putting down intellectuals. Let's say that you were a college age youngster during communism. If on your application you wrote that your parents were teachers, or god forbid, college professors, you would have a hard time getting in. You would also have a lower social status than someone whose parents were factory, steel workers or coal miners. Worse case scenario if the family had a history of being able to speak one of the the forbidden languages of the Western world, especially English.

Another way to control society was to keep them drunk. Teenage boys graduating from vocational schools were sent to factories, coal mines and shipyards making more money than

ever. My dad always bragged about having so much money as a teenager working in coal mines that he could afford to take a cab to visit my mom on the weekends a couple of hundred of miles away. Alcohol was less expensive than bread. Today, when I visit the cemetery in my hometown in Poland, I cannot stop the tears at the graves of those who drank themselves to death. Many of them were my dear childhood friends.

For the first time ever in high school, I learned that history and literature can be very complicated and that they can show many sides to the same story. That we can learn from them and make an attempt to avoid the mistakes made in the past.

The most enlightening part was to learn the accounts collected right after WWII. There was an abundance of accounts that showed the humanity in those who would do whatever it takes to survive, those who will take advantage of a given opportunity to rise to power, and who will take advantage of the weak and those in need. The accounts of doctors killing babies to save them from gas chambers; of the blame placed on the innocent that they brought the enemy to our borders; the deep feelings one might have for their native country, and the country they call home later on in their lives.

I was mortified to learn that my parents' generation didn't have access to those accounts since those books were forbidden during their youth. Their history was one sided: these guys were good and these were bad. End of story.

If you got to this part of my story, you probably know where I am heading with it. I am seeing the breadcrumbs of what was done to my first motherland now happening in my second home.

We are in the midst of a culture war fighting book banning and censorship. But if you take a very big step back and take it all in, you will notice that this is not the illness we need to fight, but rather the symptoms. Symptoms of targeted attacks on high quality public education.

Education isn't a degree, diploma or certification. The purpose of education is to learn how to think critically, how to debate and discuss complex issues, and not accept what is in front of you at face value. Education is about expanding minds and the deep exploration of concepts and ideas. Right now across the country we are seeing a movement to defund public schools in K-16. We are allowing this movement to make us believe that there are separate funding issues in K-12 and public higher education. We are being pushed towards producing more trade, future professionals, and laborers rather than thinkers.

If we don't stop this train, quality education in this country will be available only to the elite the way it was in the beginning of the 20th century. If we don't find a way to stop the destruction and manipulation of public education, we will end up with a divided society for decades.

Author

Ewa Dziedzic-Elliott serves as the subject librarian for all departments in the School of Education. She has 10 years of experience as a K-12 librarian, including work in both elementary and high school settings. She holds an MLIS from Rutgers University and an MA in Polish Language and Literature with a minor in Speech Therapy from Jan Kochanowski University, Poland, EU. She has published in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship and Library Connections*.

Submissions

We seek submissions from both researchers and practitioners, that fall into one of three submission categories:

- Opinions/First Drafts – Editorial in nature; the first draft of an idea or argument.
- White Papers – Longer form discussions that may include research.
- Peer Reviewed – Long form articles that include original research and arguments, and are submitted for review by our Editorial Board and/or external reviewers.

Submission Guidelines

Who Can Write for The Political Librarian?

We want to bring in a variety of perspectives to the journal and do not limit our contributors to just those working in the field of library and information science. We seek submissions from researchers, practitioners, community members, or others dedicated to furthering the discussion, promoting research, and helping to re-envision tax policy and public policy on the extremely local level.

Submission Categories

- Opinions/First Draft – Editorial in nature; the first draft of an idea or argument (1000-2000 words).
- White Papers – Longer form discussions that may include research (2000-5000 words).
- Peer Reviewed – Long form articles that include original research and arguments, and are submitted for peer-review by our Editorial Board and invited reviewers. (2000-12,000 words).

Article Proposals

If you want to propose an article for The Political Librarian, please submit the following:

1. Article abstract: a paragraph of no more than 250 words. Be sure to include what category of article that you're writing.
2. Attach resume/CV or a link to an online version.
3. Writing sample: this can be a fully completed article, blog post, essay, etc. Our goal is to see your style and ability not judge where the writing comes from.

Completed Works

Completed submissions should include:

1. Article abstract: a paragraph of no more than 250 words. Be sure to include what category of article that you're writing.
2. Attach resume/CV or a link to an online version.
3. Full text of the submission.

If you are interested in submitting a work to our journal, please download our complete submission guidelines and style guide, at: <https://journals.library.wustl.edu/pollib/article/id/8830/>