

## BOOK BANNING

# Libraries face increased attempts to ban books

As right-wing organizations mobilize to restrict access to titles they consider offensive, librarians in Rhode Island and around the country are finding themselves on the front lines of First Amendment freedoms

By [Amanda Milkovits](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 23, 2022, 5:49 p.m.



Amanda Darrow, director of youth, family and education programs at the Utah Pride Center, poses with books that have been the subject of complaints from parents in recent weeks on Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. RICK BOWMER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

WESTERLY, R.I. -- Like many school librarians, Marianne Mirando could see the wave

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coming across the US last year. It was only a matter of time before it hit Westerly High School.

So when a man who didn't have children in the school demanded the removal of "[Gender Queer: A Memoir](#)" from the high school library late last year, Mirando and the school administration were ready. They met with Robert J. Chiaradio Jr., a right-wing activist who alleged the book depicted pornography and pedophilia, and stood firm on the book's merits as a comic-book style novel detailing the author's experience exploring gender and sexuality.

Chiaradio complained to the school committee -- [the chairwoman was his sister](#) -- and the committee sided with the school. He later [filed a criminal complaint](#) with the Westerly Police, arguing unsuccessfully that "Gender Queer" and two other books violated federal and state obscenity laws.

In her 24 years as a librarian, Mirando said she hasn't experienced a time like this. "I believe very strongly in a student's right to read and freedom to access information," she told the Globe.

But recently, right-wing groups have mobilized to challenge books more often than ever, urging parents to push to have books removed from school and public libraries. The books targeted are often award-winning titles written by or featuring stories about people of color, which the activists claim are about "Critical Race Theory" or "divisive," or they have LGBTQ characters and themes, which activists call "pornographic" or "obscene."

According to [the First Amendment Encyclopedia by the Free Speech Center](#) at Middle Tennessee University, "Book banning, a form of censorship, occurs when private individuals, government officials, or organizations remove books from libraries, school reading lists, or bookstore shelves because they object to their content, ideas, or themes."

"The unprecedented number of challenges we're seeing already this year reflects coordinated, national efforts to silence marginalized or historically underrepresented

voices and deprive all of us – young people, in particular – of the chance to explore a world beyond the confines of personal experience,” ALA President Lessa Kanani‘opua Pelayo-Lozada said in a statement.

“Efforts to censor entire categories of books reflecting certain voices and views shows that the moral panic isn’t about kids: it’s about politics,” she said. “Organizations with a political agenda are spreading lists of books they don’t like.”

According to data released this month by the American Library Association, in 2021 the number of attempts to ban or restrict library resources in schools, universities and public libraries was the highest the ALA has recorded in its 20 years of data-gathering. And this year it is expected to be as high -- or higher.

From January to August of this year, the ALA documented 681 attempts to ban or restrict library resources, targeting 1,651 titles. Last year, there were 729 attempts to censor library resources, targeting 1,597 books.

The most-banned authors include winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, the Booker Prize, the Newbery Award, the Caldecott Medal, the Eisner Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the NAACP Image Award, and the GLAAD Award for Media Representation. “Gender Queer: A Memoir,” written and illustrated by Maia Kobabe, which won [an Alex Award](#) from the American Library Association for having “special appeal to young adults, [ages 12 through 18](#),” among other awards, is the most challenged and banned book.

While those seeking to ban books are vocal, they are a minority, [according to polling](#) by the ALA. The majority of voters across party lines oppose efforts to remove books from public libraries.

Three-quarters of parents of public-school children express a high degree of confidence in school librarians to make good decisions about which books to make available to

children, according to the ALA, and when asked about specific types of books that have been a focus of local debates, large majorities say for each that they should be available in school libraries on an age-appropriate basis.

The rise in battles over books has led school librarians across Rhode Island to develop policies on how to deal with challenges, said Joan Eldridge Mouradjian, president of School Librarians of Rhode Island and a librarian at Narragansett Pier Middle School.

In Westerly, for example, a person requesting to remove a book from a school library must fill out a five-page form that requires them to explain in detail their concerns, why they believe the material is inappropriate, whether they've read the entire book, and cite sources that agree with their opinion, among other questions. A committee that includes a teacher, parent of a student in school, certified library specialist, and principal or designee will read the book, evaluate the information, and render a decision.

Other libraries have similar policies, all intended to lay out careful procedures that evaluate whether books should be considered for removal. Pen America, a nonprofit that advocates for freedom of expression, has a [tip sheet for librarians facing harassment](#).

“Of course, if a parent doesn't want their children to read a book, that's their right,” Mouradjian said, “but they can't take it off the shelves for other children.”

PEN America has identified at least 50 groups involved in pushing for book bans at the national, state, or local levels. Of the national groups, Moms for Liberty, [formed in 2021](#), has spread most broadly, with over 200 local chapters identified on their [website](#).

According to PEN America, the groups share lists of books to challenge and employ tactics such as swarming school board meetings, using inflammatory language about “grooming” and “pornography,” and file criminal complaints against school officials, teachers, and librarians.

MIRANDO worries for new librarians, who may hesitate to purchase a book because they don't want backlash and fear they won't be supported by their school community. That "soft censorship" could just as easily keep books off shelves as the more-formal challenges.

In Rhode Island, [Pawtucket school officials removed](#) "Fun Home," by Alison Bechdel, in January after the parent of a freshman at the Jacqueline M. Walsh School for the Performing and Visual Arts said he found the book, a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, objectionable.

A recent challenge in North Kingstown came from the tiny Rhode Island chapter of the Independent Women's Forum. The IWF, with its associates Independent Women's Network and political advocacy arm, the Independent Women's Voice, are right-wing nonprofits that describe themselves as women's organizations advancing policies that "enhance people's freedom, opportunities, and well-being."

However, the Center for Media and Democracy [calls the IWF](#) "an anti-feminist organization predominantly funded by right-wing foundations," including the Koch brothers. An [investigation by The Intercept](#) found the IWF received millions of dollars from dark-money groups advancing conservative control of the courts.

Nicole Solas of South Kingstown, the Rhode Island chapter leader and a senior fellow at the [IWF's Education Freedom Center](#), led a small, vocal, and ultimately unsuccessful effort to have "Gender Queer" removed from the North Kingstown High School Library, though she does not have a child at the school. When she failed, she went to the State Police to file a complaint against the high school librarian, principal, and school committee chairman for having a book with "pornography."

"I don't want 18+ books with pornography in school libraries. It's very simple," Solas said in a text message to the Globe Monday, after hosting an IWF forum on "Gender Ideology in Schools," where she [claimed that educators were indoctrinating children](#). "There's a big difference between thinking it shouldn't be shown to children in public school and

calling for it to be banned. That difference is sensationalization [sic] that misleads the public.”

But the executive director for the Rhode Island chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union says that’s exactly what book banning is.

“A book ban very simply is removing a book from a library based on its content so it cannot be obtained by members of the public,” said Steven Brown. “I think its very unfortunate that librarians have to bear the brunt of these cultural wars.”

“It’s one thing for an individual to control what their own children read, but unconscionable for people to try to dictate what other people’s children read. It runs directly counter to what an educational system should be,” he added

According to Brian Hodge, spokesman for Attorney General Peter F. Neronha, child pornography would have to depict “a real, actual child,” as opposed to an illustration, as is the case in “Gender Queer.” And in order to be considered obscene, prosecutors would have to determine “that there is absolutely no serious artistic or literary merit to the material.” A book’s availability in legitimate book stores and recognition in literary circles strongly undercuts arguments about obscenity, he noted.

For the complaint against “Gender Queer,” the state police and attorney general’s office concluded that state criminal child pornography and obscenity laws “plainly did not apply,” said Hodge.

The attorney general believes that it is up to parents, school administrators, and school committees to determine whether a book should remain on the shelves of a school library and who should be able to access it, Hodge said in a statement.

“And certainly, it is not a priority of this office to bring criminal charges against school librarians based on a disagreement regarding what should appear on high school library shelves,” Hodge added.

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