Recent Book Ban Controversies
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Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Its primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. EPE covers local, state, national, and international news and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education publishes Education Week, America’s newspaper of record for precollegiate education, the online Teacher, EdWeek Market Brief, and the Top School Jobs employment resource. It also produces periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and special reports such as Quality Counts, and Technology Counts. The center also conducts independent research studies.

About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation supports Education Week’s coverage of strategies for advancing the opportunities for students most in need. The Foundation promotes initiatives to expand parental choice and equal opportunity in education to help spur the bold transformation of the national K-12 system of public education.

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Executive Summary

Parents and guardians are uniquely positioned to help their children succeed in school. When it comes to the educational interests and needs of an individual child, it is difficult to think of anyone who is a stronger advocate than a parent.

But what happens when a parent’s views of that individual child’s interests and needs conflict with the school’s view of the interests and needs of children writ large? Or with the interests and needs of other individual families or students? Or on educational approaches supported by research or professional expertise?

As the so-called culture wars have returned with a vengeance to K-12 education, these questions have increasingly arisen in the form of conflicts over the curriculum and books that students should be exposed to at school.

These conflicts have led to a record number of challenges to books in school libraries, as parents working to safeguard what they view as the best interests of their own children clash with educators and fellow parents on what is best for all children.

To learn more about this topic, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey of K-12 school library personnel between April 25th and 26th of 2023.

The results indicate that, while most respondents (57 percent) reported that the number of formal and informal book challenges in their districts and schools has remained the same since 2019-20, a sizeable minority (41 percent) said that such challenges are more common today than they were three years ago.

Most library personnel reported that students do not notice book ban controversies. When they do notice, the book challenges make students interested in reading the challenged content even more, the librarians reported.

Key survey findings include:

- When survey respondents were asked how much influence parents have in terms of selecting books for libraries in their district or school, 68 percent said ‘none.’ Only 3 percent indicated that parents have ‘a lot’ of influence. However, 63 percent of respondents indicated parents have ‘a lot’ of influence (39 percent) or ‘some’ (24 percent) influence on decisions about which books their own children can or cannot borrow from the library.

- Sixty-four percent of librarians said that they do not believe any topics should be banned from books in their districts.

- Most survey respondents said there aren’t any books being challenged in their schools or districts but 37 percent indicated that at least one book has been challenged over the course of the past couple of years.

- Seventy-one percent said that they have not experienced any negative consequences as a result of the controversies related to book challenges in their districts or schools. This might be due in part to the fact that librarians reported that they try to avoid issues with parents and the surrounding community by altering their book selection behavior.

- The majority of respondents (53 percent) said that, as a result of book ban controversies, they are less likely to choose titles that could be controversial.
Introduction

In the spring of 2023, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey of library personnel to examine the impact that parents are having on the books available to students via school libraries. The survey was conducted in response to widespread reports that a renewed focus on the so-called culture wars had resulted in an increase in parents’ challenges to school library books.

To get a better sense of whether this type of parental involvement is impacting school libraries and the ways in which it could be affecting them, the Research Center analyzed survey responses from more than 1,700 librarians, library directors, and library assistants who work in K-12 schools and districts.

SURVEY DETAILS

Surveys Administered: April 25 and 26, 2023

Sample: Nationally representative

Method: Online [E-mail invitations sent to an online survey]

Respondents: 1,730 respondents participated in this survey; this includes 994 librarians, 434 library/media center paraprofessionals, 189 library/media center directors, and 113 who identified as having other library or media-center-related positions

Demographics

When survey respondents were asked which role comes the closest to describing their jobs, the majority (57 percent) said ‘librarian.’ One-quarter said ‘library/media center paraprofessional.’ Roughly 1 out of 10 survey respondents said they were the library/media center director. Seven percent of the respondents said they had a different type of library or media-center-related position.

The survey respondents work within libraries in school systems throughout the United States. Respondents most commonly identified their district as being located in the South (32 percent) followed by the Midwest at 28 percent. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) indicated that their district is located in the West and 16 percent hailed from the Northeast.

Nearly 9 in 10 respondents worked in traditional public school systems. Six in 10 described their school districts as having 2,500 or more students enrolled.

Roughly half of the survey respondents worked in districts in which the majority of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals, a common proxy for family poverty.

Forty-five percent described their districts as suburban and 41 percent worked in rural areas or towns. Fifteen percent worked in an urban setting.
Which of the following comes closest to describing your job?

- Librarian: 57%
- Library/media center paraprofessional: 25%
- Library/media center director: 11%
- Other library or media-center related position—please specify: 7%

In which state is your district located?

- Northeast: 32%
- Midwest: 28%
- South: 24%
- West: 16%
Which of the following best describes your employer?

- Public school/district—not a charter: 89%
- Private school/network: 9%
- Charter school/network: 9%

Approximately how many students are enrolled in your school district?

- Less than 2,500: 30%
- 2,500-9,999: 39%
- 10,000 or more: 30%

Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Which of the following best describes your school district’s percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals?

- 25 percent or less
- 26 to 50 percent
- 51 to 75 percent
- More than 75 percent

Which of the following best describes your district’s location?

- Suburban
- Rural or town
- Urban

Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Book Ban Challenges Attempting to Remove or Restrict Materials

Changes since 2019-20

While many librarians have faced new conflicts over the books in their collections in recent years, that experience isn’t universal. Most respondents (57%) said the number of challenges to books in their libraries hasn’t changed since 2019-20. A substantial minority (41%), however, reported that the number of challenges increased since that time. Just 2 percent saw a decline.

Since 2019-20, the number of formal and informal book challenges that attempted to remove or restrict materials in our library or libraries has/have:

- Decreased
- Stayed the same
- Increased

41% 
57%

Topics That Librarians Would Exclude From Their Libraries

Book challenges on any topic are not in line with the beliefs expressed by most librarians and library staffers. The large majority (64%) do not believe that any topics should be banned or excluded from libraries in their schools or districts.

Roughly one-fifth (19%) of respondents believe that books with content about sexual violence or abuse should be excluded from their libraries. A similar share (17%) think books with material regarding non-violent sexuality should be kept off their shelves. At least 1 in 10 would exclude books containing profanity (14%), white power/nationalism (12%), racial slurs (12%), and LGBTQ+ characters or issues (10%).

Librarians more rarely support the removal of books discussing a broad array of topics. Between 1 and 4 percent felt that libraries in their schools or districts should exclude books that depict or discuss the following: atheism, magic or witchcraft, non-traditional family structures, Jim Crow, racial inequities, evolution, feminism, slavery, any type of religion or specific religions, and climate change. Zero percent believed books should be removed based on references to race/ethnicity, economic inequities, the Holocaust, or immigration.
Select all that apply. In my opinion, libraries in my district or school should NOT include any books that depict or include topics related to:

- I do not believe any topics should be banned (64%)
- Sexual violence or abuse (19%)
- Other, please specify (18%)
- Sex/sexuality that is not violent or abusive (17%)
- Profanity (14%)
- White power/nationalism (12%)
- Racial slurs (12%)
- LGBTQ+ characters or issues (10%)
- Critical race theory (9%)
- Drinking, drug use, or other substance use/abuse (9%)
- Violence or abuse that is not sexual (8%)
- Suicide (7%)
- Gambling (5%)
- Gender (5%)
- Atheism (4%)
- Magic or witchcraft (3%)
- Non-traditional family structures (3%)
- Jim Crow (2%)
- Racial inequities (2%)
- Evolution (2%)
- Feminism (2%)
- Slavery and slaveholding (1%)
- Any type of religion (1%)
- Climate change (1%)
- Specific religions (1%)
- Ethnicity/race (0%)
- Economic inequities (0%)
- The Holocaust (0%)
- Immigration (0%)

How Often Do Book Challenges Occur and What Happens When They Do?

Nearly two-thirds of librarians and other library personnel said that there haven’t been any books in their libraries that have been challenged in the past two school years. But when books were challenged, 38 percent of respondents said at least one book was actually removed from circulation.
How many books in your library/libraries have been challenged in the past two school years?

- None: 63%
- 1: 13%
- 2: 8%
- 3: 4%
- 4: 2%
- 5: 2%
- 6: 1%
- 7: 0%
- 8: 0%
- 9: 0%
- 10: 0%
- More than 10: 5%

Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

In the past two school years, what was the outcome when your library books were challenged? Select all that apply.

- No titles were removed from our library: 44%
- At least one book was removed: 38%
- Challenged books remained in the library during the challenge process: 32%
- Books have been removed pending a challenge: 19%
- Challenges are still pending: 13%
Evaluations and Decisions on Book Challenges

When survey respondents were asked about the process for a book to be challenged or banned in their libraries, two-thirds said the book goes through a review process by a committee of educators, parents, and community members. Nine out of 10 respondents reported that when books are challenged their content is reviewed to evaluate whether it is appropriate for students. More than half (56 percent) said that the merit and cultural relevance of the books are evaluated.

What is the process for a book to be challenged or banned in your library/libraries? Select all that apply.

- The book goes through a review process by a committee of educators/parents/community members: 66%
- A parent or concerned individual contacts the school administration with a complaint: 55%
- The school librarian makes a decision to remove the book from the library: 20%
- Other, please specify: 17%
- The book is immediately removed from the library without any review process: 4%
- The author of the book is consulted before any decision is made: 0%

What criteria are used to evaluate whether a book that has been challenged is appropriate for students? Select all that apply.

- The appropriateness of the book’s content: 90%
- The merit and cultural relevance of the book: 56%
- Potential impact on student development: 44%
- The reading level and complexity of the book: 42%
- Whether or not the book appears to violate state laws: 26%
- Other, please specify: 11%
- The personal beliefs and opinions of parents: 6%
- The personal beliefs and opinions of school administrators: 6%
Survey respondents most commonly reported that school librarians and library staff members make decisions about whether to remove books from the library’s collection. They also commonly indicated that a committee of educators, parents, and community members make such determinations.

Who makes decisions about whether to remove a book from the library’s collection? Select all that apply.

- The school librarian or library staff: 57%
- A committee of educators/parents/community members: 51%
- Principal: 35%
- Superintendent: 28%
- School board members: 25%
- Other, please specify: 10%
- Assistant superintendent: 7%
- Teachers: 6%
- Assistant principal: 6%
- Parents: 5%

Availability of Challenged Books

When a book is challenged, students may still be able to access it in some school libraries. Most librarians and library staff members (59 percent) said that a challenged book remains in the library’s collection and is available to all students unless it is officially banned. But one-fifth of survey respondents said the challenged book is immediately removed from the library’s collection and would not be available.

What happens to books that are challenged in your library or libraries? Select all that apply.

- The book remains in the library’s collection and is available to all students unless it is officially banned: 59%
- The challenged book is immediately removed from the library’s collection and unavailable: 20%
- Other, please specify: 13%
- The book is moved to a restricted section of the library or placed on reserve: 13%
- The book remains in the library’s collection but is only available to students with parental permission: 13%
- The book is replaced with an alternative title that addresses the same themes or topics: 11%
- A print version is no longer available on the shelf but students can read an ebook/electronic version of the book: 3%
- 2%
Impact of Book Controversies on Library Personnel

Although 7 in 10 respondents said they have not personally experienced any negative consequences as a result of controversies related to book challenges, others reported a range of difficulties. Roughly one-fifth said their professional judgment has been called into question and 8 percent feared that they would lose their jobs.

In the past two years, what, if any, negative consequences have you experienced as a result of controversies related to book challenges in your district or school? Select all that apply.

- I have not experienced any negative consequences 71%
- My professional judgement has been called into question 21%
- Other, please specify 13%
- I have feared losing my job 8%
- I have been called names/insulted 6%
- I have feared for my physical safety 2%
- I have been stalked online 1%
- I have been stalked in person 0%
- I have been threatened with physical violence 0%
- I have received one or more death threats 0%
- I have been laid off/fired 0%
- I have feared for my life 0%

One-quarter indicated that stress related to book ban controversies has caused them to consider leaving their current jobs and about the same share indicated it has caused them to think about leaving the school library profession altogether. Nearly 1 in 5 reported that threats related to book ban controversies have led them to take more steps to safeguard their physical safety.

The most common consequence of potential book ban controversies stems from librarians’ attempts to avoid them in the first place. The majority of survey respondents (53%) said that as a result of possible controversies they are less likely to choose titles that could be controversial.
To what extent do you agree or agree with the following statements?

As a result of potential book ban controversies, I am less likely to choose titles that could be controversial: 53% Agree, 47% Disagree.

Stress related to book ban controversies has led me to consider leaving the school library profession altogether: 27% Agree, 73% Disagree.

Stress related to book ban controversies has led me to consider leaving my current job: 25% Agree, 75% Disagree.

As a result of threats related to book banning controversies, I am taking more steps these days to safeguard my physical safety: 17% Agree, 83% Disagree.

Impact of Book Challenges on Students

Book challenges may not be having a widespread impact on students or their parents. The majority of respondents working in school libraries (57%) said that students didn’t seem to notice when a book was challenged in their schools or districts over the past two school years. One-third of librarians said that students will get more interested in reading a book if it has been challenged.

In the past two school years, when a book has been challenged in your district or school, how have students reacted? Select all that apply.

- They don't seem to notice 57%
- They get more interested in reading the book 33%
- Other, please specify 26%
- They ask for help finding the book outside of school 11%
- They visit the library/use its services more frequently 8%
- They suggest books to replace the banned book 2%
- They visit the library/use its services less frequently 1%
- They support the ban 1%
- They suggest other books to ban 1%
Most respondents said that book challenges have not impacted the frequency with which students use the library’s resources (85 percent), their level of interest in reading (79 percent), or their level of interest in reading the challenged books (59 percent). Respondents were two times more likely to say that book challenges elevated students’ interest in the specific book being challenged (40 percent) than to indicate they would increase their overall interest in reading more generally (18 percent).

### In the past two school years, when a book has been challenged in your district or school, how, if at all, did it impact students?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>The frequency with which students use the library's services/resources</td>
<td>85%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students' level of interest in reading</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students' level of interest in reading the challenged book(s)</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>40%</td>
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#### Parental Influence and Information on Book Issues

**Support for the Library**

When a book has been challenged in their schools or districts in the past two school years, 7 in 10 library staff members indicated that it did not have any impact on parental support for the library or parental involvement in reviewing the library’s collection.

Respondents were much more likely to see increases than decreases in parental involvement or support in response to book challenges.

Thirty percent reported an increase in parental involvement in reviewing the library’s collection and 19 percent cited an increase in parental support for the library. Survey respondents did not see any decreases in parental involvement in reviewing the library’s collection. Nine percent cited a decrease in parental support for the library.

Sixty-two percent of respondents said parental involvement in reviewing their own children’s library books did not change.
In the past two school years, when a book has been challenged in your district or school, how, if at all, did it impact parental involvement and/or support in the following areas?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Increased</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental support for the library</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement in reviewing the library’s collection</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental involvement in reviewing their own children’s library books</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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Level of Influence

The survey examined parental influence on both the selection of books for the library and their own children’s borrowing of books. Fifty-six percent of survey respondents said that parents can prevent their children from borrowing specific books from the library. Only 10 percent said that parents cannot influence the books their children borrow.

How, if at all, do parents in your district or school influence the books their children can borrow from your library/libraries? Select all that apply.

- Parents can prevent their children from borrowing specific books: 56%
- Parents can prevent their children from borrowing any books whatsoever from our libraries: 41%
- Parents can ask to review all books their children ask to borrow, preventing their children from borrowing a book they do not approve of: 41%
- Other, please specify: 18%
- Parents can prevent their children from entering school libraries or using their online resources: 14%
- Our parents cannot influence the books their children borrow: 10%
When survey respondents were asked how much influence parents have in terms of selecting books for libraries in their schools or districts, 68 percent said ‘none.’ Only 3 percent identified parents as having “a lot” of influence. By contrast, 63 percent identified parents as having ‘a lot’ of influence (39 percent) or ‘some’ (24 percent) influence on decisions about which books their own children can borrow. Only 16 percent of library personnel respondents said parents did not influence their children’s book selections.

**In your district or school, how much influence do parents have on the following?**

- **Selecting books for libraries in your district or school**
  - None: 68%
  - A little: 22%
  - Some: 8%

- **Deciding which books their own children can/cannot borrow from school/district libraries**
  - None: 16%
  - A little: 21%
  - Some: 24%
  - A lot: 39%

_Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding._

When librarians and media specialists were asked how much influence parents should have in terms of book selection for their children and the libraries in their schools or districts, the majority of respondents supported the status quo.

**In your view, how much influence should parents have on the following?**

- **Selecting books for libraries in your district or school**
  - A lot less: 34%
  - A little less: 5%
  - Neither less nor more: 55%
  - A little more: 4%

- **Deciding which books their own children can/cannot borrow from your school/district libraries**
  - A lot less: 9%
  - A little less: 7%
  - Neither less nor more: 65%
  - A little more: 8%
  - A lot more: 11%
Fifty-five percent thought parents should have neither more nor less than influence on the selection of books for libraries in their schools or districts than they currently have.

Sixty-five percent thought parents should have the same amount of influence as they currently have in deciding which books their children can borrow from the library.

Nearly 2 out of 5 library personnel respondents thought parents should have less influence when it comes to selecting books for libraries. Only 6 percent thought they should have ‘a little more’ or ‘a lot more’ influence.

Only 16 percent of respondents believed parents should have less influence on decisions about which books their children can or cannot borrow.

**Information Gaps**

Library staffers were also asked how parents and other community members are informed about book challenges and bans. Nearly half (48 percent) said they didn’t know. Among those who indicated they could answer the survey question, most (61 percent) said that parents and community members are not informed about book challenges or bans.

**How are parents and other community members informed about book challenges and bans? Select all that apply.**

- Parents and community members are not informed about book challenges or bans: 61%
- The school board holds a public hearing where the challenge or ban is discussed: 15%
- The school district posts information about the challenge or ban on its website and social media accounts: 7%
- The school district sends a district-wide email informing parents and community members: 4%
- The school district sends a letter to parents of students who have checked out the book: 3%

*Forty-eight percent of respondents were removed from the analysis for this survey question because they answered “I don’t know.”*
Library Finance and Resources

Budget Impact of Book Controversies

A slight majority of respondents (51 percent) said that although they have or expect book ban controversies, they do not expect them to impact their budgets for 2023-24. Another 39 percent said they do not anticipate any impact on library funding because they do not have or expect any book ban controversies.

How—if at all—do you expect controversies related to book bans will impact your library funding in 2023-24?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although we have or expect book ban controversies, we do not expect them to impact our budget</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact—we do not have or expect any book ban controversies</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease funding a little</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease funding a lot</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase funding a little</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase funding a lot</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</table>

Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Purchasing Decisions and Resources

When asked to identify the people required to review decisions about book purchases in their schools or districts, 88 percent pointed to school librarians or library staff members. One-fifth cited principals.

Very few said that students (1 percent) or their parents (1 percent) are required to review such decisions.

When asked to identify the resources available to them in responding to book challenges, 7 in 10 cited support from national organizations such as the American Library Association.

Forty-three percent pointed to professional development and training opportunities. Thirty percent said that legal counsel and representation provided by the school district is available to them as a resource.

Only 12 percent reported that they don’t have any resources available to them in responding to book challenges.
When your library/libraries purchase a book, who is required to review the decision? Select all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school librarian or library staff</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A committee made up of educators, parents, and community members</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant superintendent</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School board members</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant principal</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

What resources are available to you in responding to book challenges? Select all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support from national organizations such as the American Library Association</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development and training opportunities</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legal counsel and representation provided by the school district</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online databases and resources for finding alternative titles and lesson plans</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No resources are available to me in responding to book challenges</td>
<td>12%</td>
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