

BANNED BELIEFS

How People of
Diverse Faiths Are
Fighting to Protect
Our Public Schools
and Libraries



**INTERFAITH
ALLIANCE**
ACHIEVING DEMOCRACY TOGETHER





**INTERFAITH
ALLIANCE**
ACHIEVING DEMOCRACY TOGETHER

110 Maryland Ave NE #509
Washington, DC, 20002
TEL: 202.466.0567
www.interfaithalliance.org

ABOUT INTERFAITH ALLIANCE

Interfaith Alliance is a network of people of diverse faiths and beliefs from across the country working together to build a resilient democracy and fulfill America's promise of religious freedom and civil rights not just for some, but for all. We mobilize powerful coalitions to challenge Christian nationalism and religious extremism, while fostering a better understanding of the healthy boundaries between religion and government. We advocate at all levels of government for an equitable and just America where the freedoms of belief and religious practice are protected, and where all persons are treated with dignity and have the opportunity to thrive.

BOOK BANS AND ACADEMIC CENSORSHIP THREATEN OUR DEMOCRACY

Our nation's public schools and libraries are building blocks for an inclusive, participatory democracy, where exposure to new ideas allows students to flourish and grow. But a coordinated national censorship campaign is eliminating diverse perspectives and creating a hostile learning environment with a particular burden falling on youth representing minority faiths, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations and gender identities.

According to PEN America, there were 3,362 instances of school book bans in the 2022-23 academic year, compared to 2,532 the previous year.¹ The American Library Association (ALA) reported 695 attempts to censor library materials and services between January and August, 2023.² At the root of this movement is a concerted effort by Christian nationalists and others on the Religious Right to restrict our public schools and libraries to conform to an extreme religious worldview. This national movement is creating a culture of fear among parents and teachers and threatening the foundations of our civil society by erasing history and diverse viewpoints from our curriculum and libraries.

BOOK BANS AND ACADEMIC CENSORSHIP THREATEN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Instead of celebrating diversity of belief, many book ban advocates are using religion as a sword to discriminate by limiting subject matter that is not in line with one particular faith perspective. In the name of "parental rights" and religious freedom, they are removing books from school and public libraries with LGBTQ+ characters and themes, and books about the Holocaust, race, racism, and those featuring characters of color.

Many of the books under attack are by authors of diverse traditions and tell stories of diverse religions and beliefs. According to PEN America, during the 2022 to 2023 academic year, 51 banned book titles include characters and stories that reflect religious minorities, such as Jewish, Muslim and other faith traditions, with 41 instances of book bans targeting books centering Jewish characters, and 57 instances targeting books centering Muslim characters. This effort to limit students' exposure to a variety of faiths and perspectives is in direct opposition to the freedoms of speech and religion protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, as well as the pluralism envisioned by the founders of our nation.

¹ Data from [PEN America Index of School Book Bans, July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023](#).

² Data from American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom [Banned and Challenged Books, January 1, 2023 to August 31, 2023](#).



BOOK BANS ARE ROOTED IN THE CHRISTIAN NATIONALIST PLAYBOOK

The overwhelming efforts in local school boards, statehouses and the federal government to limit speech and censor education is a political strategy rooted in the rise of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that conflates American identity with an exclusive form of religious identity rooted in the myth that we were founded as a Christian nation. By banning books in schools, they are attempting to impose their narrow definition of American identity—and at the expense of taxpayers.

The movement to ban books has found startling success: over the past few years, efforts to label certain books “harmful” and “explicit” have prompted the removal of thousands of titles from public school libraries and classrooms across the country. But their extreme agenda is not embraced by the majority of Americans: a 2022 ALA poll found that seven out of ten voters oppose book bans.³

BOOK BANS AND THE PARENTAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Book bans and academic censorship efforts demonize teachers and libraries and create a hostile school environment. These efforts are often framed as part of the “parental rights” movement, a conservative initiative to restrict schools' ability to teach or practice certain viewpoints on gender, sexuality and race without parental consent. The success of this growing movement has empowered a conservative and reactionary minority of parents to dictate education and curriculums to the rest of the community under the guise of religious freedom and protecting their children from learning diverse ideas.

The parental rights movement is best exemplified by the group Moms for Liberty, which was founded in 2021 and grew out of opposition to public health regulations in response to COVID-19. This group, which was recently designated as an extremist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, opposes LGBTQ+ and racially inclusive school curriculum and is the leader of many efforts to ban books nationwide.

BOOK BANS CREATE AN UNSAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Book ban efforts pose an acute threat to the future of public schools as safe, inclusive spaces for all students, and to our constitutional rights. They can create an unsafe learning environment for students whose identity or faith are connected to the subject matter of the books being banned or who do not otherwise fit the mold of the Christian nationalist worldview.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has the responsibility to investigate complaints about whether book removals create a hostile environment for students based on sex, race, color, or national origin under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was tested most recently in spring 2023 when OCR found that a library screening process in Forsyth County, GA pertaining to books with racial, sexual, or LGBTQ+ content may have created a hostile learning environment for students. OCR ordered the county to amend its process to ensure students feel comfortable and safe in school.

³ Data from a [survey conducted by Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research](#) on behalf of the ALA among 1,000 voters and 472 parents of children in public school. The survey was conducted March 1 to 6, 2022, and the sample is demographically and geographically representative of U.S. voters and parents.

FAITH COMMUNITIES ARE ON THE FRONT LINES FIGHTING BACK

People of diverse faiths have often been at the forefront of movements for justice, equality, and democracy. Today, as people of faith and conscience, we are called to carry on that legacy by pushing back against the coordinated movement to censor public schools and marginalize minority voices in our schools and libraries.

Faith activists around the country are pushing back. In Naples, FL, Interfaith Alliance of Southwest Florida has been mobilizing to speak out against the Collier County School Board's decision to restrict access to books on issues related to LGBTQ+ identity, race, and sex. They have joined together to speak out at in-person school board meetings, ensuring the faith voice is visible and vocal in their county. They are also raising their voice to speak out on school vouchers as a component of a thinly veiled agenda to promote Christian nationalism. And in Texas, faith advocates are fighting back against a vague new law banning books with "sexually explicit" content.

HOW TO FIGHT BACK TO PROTECT OUR SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES

1 REACH OUT TO CONGRESS

Urge your member of Congress to sponsor and pass the Banned Books resolution (H.Res. 733/S.Res. 372) sponsored by Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD) and Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI).

2 MONITOR SCHOOL BOARD HAPPENINGS AND SPEAK OUT

Sign up to follow your local school board agenda to see if book bans are being considered and engage faith leaders and others in testifying and writing letters and op-eds to speak out.

3 FILE A DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CIVIL RIGHTS COMPLAINT

If implementation of a book ban or screening process has the potential to create a hostile learning environment for students based on race, color, national origin, ethnicity, ancestry, sex, gender, disability or age, [file a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights](#).

4 FOLLOW SCHOOL BOARD, LOCAL, AND STATE ELECTIONS AND VOTE:

Book bans and academic censorship are implemented in school board, county, and state elections. Make sure to pay attention to dates of local elections, what candidates are running, and their respective platforms. Elections at this level have lower voter turnout than federal elections and the winners of these elections could have a significant impact on your school district and library.



COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT FAITH AND BOOK BANS

Why are book bans and academic censorship a faith issue?

Banning books and censoring diverse viewpoints is harmful to our democracy, specifically impacting the diversity of the American people, including religious diversity. Many of the titles being banned in schools and libraries around the country are about minority faiths, which is a threat to religious freedom. Further, in many cases, LGBTQ+ subject matter is being banned under the guise of religious freedom. It is imperative that people of faith speak out to protect our pluralistic, inclusive democracy.

I don't want my kids to see pornography. Shouldn't this content be banned?

Efforts to label certain books "harmful" and "explicit" are expanding the type of content suppressed in schools. These terms are subjective. It is up to each family to determine what content their children should be exposed to and at what age, but we cannot limit or censor material for *all* students based on each family's views. We should trust educators and librarians to determine age-appropriate content, while retaining the ability to help supervise our children at home.

Doesn't this constant focus on diversity end up marginalizing those in the majority?

Public schools, libraries, and institutions of higher education are the building blocks of our nation, where people are introduced to civic and democratic ideals and diverse points of view, enabling them to become informed and vocal citizens. What makes America great is its diversity and commitment to pluralism, and learning about our history and our differences makes us stronger.

Due to my faith, I do not want my children exposed to or indoctrinated in LGBTQ+ subject matter. Shouldn't I be able to opt out?

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects citizens' right to freely express their own religion, and to be free from government endorsement of religion. You can address issues of sexuality and identity however you like at home and in your house of worship, but government officials cannot prioritize or censor certain issues due to one faith perspective over another. While you can certainly ask for a religious exemption for your children from health class and lessons about sexuality, exposure to LGBTQ+ inclusive literature is different. It is critical to teach children about the diversity in our communities so that they can be participatory, engaged citizens in a pluralistic society.

QUICK FACTS:

- There were 3,362 instances of school book bans in the 2022-23 academic year, compared to 2,532 the previous year.⁴
- 51 faith books were banned during the 2022-23 academic year, including 41 instances of Jewish books being banned and 57 instances of Muslim books.⁵
- 33 states banned books, with Florida banning the most books, with Texas and Missouri following with the highest number of instances.⁶
- Through the first eight months of 2023, the ALA tracked 695 challenges to library materials and services, compared to 681 during the same time period last year, and a 20% jump in the number of “unique titles” involved to 1,915. Comparatively, in 2019, the last pre-pandemic year, the ALA recorded just 377 challenges, involving 566 titles.⁷

⁴ Data from PEN America Index of School Book Bans, July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ American Library Association Press Release September 19, 2023

RESOURCES:

- [Unite Against Book Bans](#)
- [PEN America - Banned in the USA](#)
- [ALA: Banned and Challenged Books](#)
- [ALA Library Bill of Rights](#)
- [Urban Libraries Council](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights](#)

