

More Licensed School Library Teachers, *Less Book Banning*

Public schools prepare kids to participate in democracy

Licensed school library teachers are an essential part of a child's education. They work with educators to curate collections that support curriculum, provide diverse perspectives, and give students access to experiences that are different from their own. The National Education Association asserts, "Quality teaching depends on the freedom to select materials and techniques. Teachers and librarians/media specialists must have the right to select instructional/library materials without censorship or legislative interference. Public schools' commitment to intellectual freedom helps ensure that students are ready to participate in a diverse democracy."

Book bans in schools are becoming more widespread

PEN America counted 1,648 books banned in schools across the U.S. over the 2021-22 school year. Bans occurred in 138 school districts in 32 states. These districts represent 5,049 schools with a combined enrollment of nearly 4 million students. The Massachusetts School Library Association has received reports of 24 separate challenges at 8 different schools. One of the challenged books, Mike Curato's *Flamer*, won the 2021 Middle Grade/YA Massachusetts Book Award from the Massachusetts Center for the Book at a ceremony at the statehouse.

States are passing laws to limit student access and criminalize librarians and educators

EveryLibrary is monitoring this type of legislation nationwide. The American Federation of Teachers -New Hampshire calls New Hampshire's recently proposed HB 514 (a Bill on 'Obscene Materials' in K-12 and Higher Education Classes, Public Libraries), "a book ban meant to intimidate teachers and deprive students"—both school-aged and adults—of books that one person who files a complaint deems objectionable. For public universities, public libraries and museums, it adds the Department of Education to the agencies that can initiate legal hearings to find material 'obscene' after receiving anonymous citizen complaints. Higher education faculty actually could be arrested, charged and indicted."

Students have the right to read under the First Amendment

Courts have held that minors have First Amendment rights and that those rights include the right to receive information. In the Supreme Court case Island Trees School District v. Pico (1982), Justice Blackmun stated in part, "school officials may not remove books for the purpose of restricting access to the political ideas or social perspectives discussed in them, when that action is motivated simply by the officials' disapproval of the ideas involved. It does not seem radical to suggest that state action calculated to suppress novel ideas or concepts is fundamentally antithetical to the values of the First Amendment. At a minimum, allowing a school board to engage in such conduct hardly teaches children to respect the diversity of ideas that is fundamental to the American system."

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Licensed school library teachers ensure students are matched with age-appropriate materials

Licensed school library teachers are required to have a master's degree in library and information science. Not only do they know how to connect readers to the right material, but they also teach the latest technology, research skills and critical thinking. In fact, **numerous studies show** students whose schools have qualified school librarians score better on standards-based language arts, reading, and writing tests, regardless of student demographics and school characteristics. **Yet in Massachusetts 20%, or one in five school libraries, across district types, do not have professionally licensed school librarians.**

Access to digital content in a responsible way

Massachusetts has a successful statewide school eBook program that benefits from a robust collection development policy and aligns with student needs and school curriculum. Through state funding, students in schools with a licensed school library teacher also have access to research databases that enhance their education. Licensed school library teachers work with school curriculum to guide students to online content from trusted sources.

A challenge or ban in one part of the country affects us all

Fears of challenges may cause librarians and educators to self-censor (avoiding promoting or purchasing certain materials) and may push schools to make changes to the texts they use in their curriculum. The organized, targeted campaign across the country to ban books centered on people of color and LGBTQ+ people harm students. In a recent **open letter** from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) they state: "Removing books that reflect students' experiences not only removes a support; it tells a student that they and their community are not accepted by teachers and peers."

Further Reading & Resources

- **Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth**
- **Schools & Minors Rights**
By the American Library Association (ALA)
- **Intellectual Freedom Guide**
By the Massachusetts Library System (MLS)
- **Intellectual Freedom Resources**
By the Massachusetts School Library Association (MSLA)
- **The First Amendment in Schools: A Resource Guide (2013)**
By the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)
- **Online Manuals of School District Documents, including Library Materials Collection Policies and Reconsideration Policies**

Taking Action

- **Resources for Teachers, Parents and School Officials**
By the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)
- **Template Letter to Advocate for Educators & Librarians**
By Kate Messner
- **Book Censorship Action Kit for Students and Parents**
By the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)
- **Fight for the First Campaign**

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