

Parental Controls

Whether in high school classrooms or through state laws, young people's bookshelves continually fall under scrutiny—and control. PEN America's Index of School Book Bans lists 1,145 unique books banned between July 1, 2021 and March 31, 2022, as "a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials."¹

Much of the censored literature, according to PEN America, includes narratives representing sexual and racial minorities: 41% of the books "contain protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color," 33% directly discuss LGBTQ+ themes or include LGBTQ+ protagonists or prominent secondary characters, and 22% explicitly concern racism.

One example of government action is HB 1557, Florida's high-profile "Don't Say Gay" bill. One clause of the bill states, "Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards."²

Legislation supporters emphasize concerns about parental rights—especially the right to control what their children are taught about gender and sexuality. For example, Governor Ron DeSantis critiqued classroom discussion of gender nonconformity, "It's trying to say that, you know, they can be whatever they want to be. This is inappropriate. ... And shouldn't parents know if that is something that is in the curriculum?" Florida Senator Marco Rubio concurred: "We don't send kids to school so the schools can raise our kids... We send them so they can teach them; raising kids are the job of parents and families, not schools. And so that's what that bill does."³

Critics of the bill, including The Trevor Project, emphasize the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Jonathan Friedman, Director of PEN America's Free Expression and Education program indicates, "We are witnessing the erasure of topics that only recently represented progress toward inclusion."⁴ Further, LGBTQ+ young adults are at higher risk for suicide than straight and cisgender classmates, yet "when those kids are given access to spaces that affirm their gender identity, they report lower rates of suicide attempts."⁵

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When, if ever, is it morally permissible to ban a book from a school or public library?
2. Do teachers have a moral responsibility to encourage discussion and inclusion of diverse perspectives and identities in coursework? What behaviors might such a responsibility prescribe?
3. What sort of say, if any, should parents have over what their children are taught in school?

¹ <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>

² [https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText\(er\)/PDF](https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText(er)/PDF)

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MSUgkLnB2Q&t=111s>

⁴ <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-prevalent-are-book-bans-this-year-new-data-show-impact/2022/04>

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis>

