

## Don't Ban Books—Teach Students How To Read Them

On "debate days" in my AP Literature class, our teacher, Mrs. Beebe, tells us to stand. To her right, the "agree" side, and to her left, the "disagree" side. She reads a statement, usually something controversial, like "women's only purpose in life is to have a family" or "everyone can be a good person", and we move. Sometimes—well, more often than not—we argue passionately. Sometimes we change sides halfway through, or decide we're squarely in the middle. And sometimes we end up questioning ourselves because someone we thought we disagreed with actually had a pretty good point. Ultimately, those are the days I learn the most, not because we all agree, but because we *don't*. Unfortunately, that kind of learning disappears when books are banned.

We tend to read controversial books in AP Literature, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Kite Runner*, and *Fahrenheit 451*, which in 2025 was removed from school libraries by the Elizabeth School District board in Colorado, who cited concerns over drug use, suicide, violence, and using God's name in vain. Students in the district are now required to obtain parental permission to read *Fahrenheit 451*, among 109 other books.

When my AP Literature class reads something uncomfortable or controversial, we don't just skim past it. We take notes on it and make it a point of discussion each day in class. We talk about it. We argue. We listen. Sometimes we end up changing our standpoints multiple times. We don't just learn about the text...we learn about each other, and about how someone else's opinions and values shapes their interpretation. We learn how to support an argument with evidence, to listen without interrupting, and to consider perspectives with an air of empathy.

If schools remove books that spark these conversations, what's left? Evidently, it's stories that everyone already agrees on that are, frankly, boring. Books that raise no questions, and lessons that spark no debate. A curriculum that feels safer, maybe—but also shallower, blander, and uninteresting. Without those debates on important and usually current topics,

where are students receiving that valuable learning about the hard truths of the real world instead of a perfect, comfortable world that doesn't exist? Where are they practicing their listening skills, or their critical thinking, or their empathy? If students are all agreeing on the same base-level topics, what can they even take away from the lesson at the end of the day? Education isn't supposed to be easy. It's supposed to challenge students to understand mature topics, different perspectives, and contrasting opinions.

Across the country, school districts are debating what books belong in classrooms and libraries. Some challenges come from genuine concerns about age-appropriateness. Others come from more political or religious beliefs about what students should or shouldn't read. But when schools remove books for *everyone*, they not only aren't protecting students, they're denying them the chance to learn how to think. While schools must maintain age-appropriate literary limitations for different age groups, they should replace universal book bans with a more choice-based system. This would encourage students and families to choose to engage with challenging material, because discussion—not censorship—is what ultimately educates students.

Students know by now that censorship isn't a new problem. History keeps on showing what happens when societies try to control and censor ideas. During the rise of Nazi Germany, books were piled up and burned in public squares. Homes were being raided and people were being arrested for having "un-German" books that went against Nazi ideology. In my AP Literature class, we just read *Fahrenheit 451*, in which Ray Bradbury imagined a future where books were outlawed and again, burned, to keep people comfortable and obedient. It serves as a warning to future generations to leave books and therefore, education alone. Both of these historical examples remind us that censorship rarely protects truth and instead, usually protects power.

Supporters of current book bans will often argue that they're protecting kids. For example, organizations like Take Back the Classroom claim that "Pornographic books have infiltrated classrooms and libraries for the purpose of grooming our children under the guise of

education," and encourage parents to "Find out which pornographic books are in your child's school." Reading this, I was intrigued, to say the least, so I searched up my own school. As it turns out, there are 76 "sexually explicit" books in my school library, including the controversial graphic novel *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, that are grooming me at this very moment. But are they grooming me differently than all the social media apps on my phone?

Teenagers already have phones, computers, internet access, social media...the list goes on. They hear things in hallways, bathrooms and locker rooms. They can check books out of public libraries or even buy them themselves. *We know* what's going on. What's stopping us from turning around and doing the exact opposite of what our school board tells us to do? What's stopping an 18-year-old from driving to their local bookstore and buying their own copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* and reading it alone because their school refuses to let them read it in their English class with a trusted professional that could direct them to any support they needed?

The real question isn't whether students will come across hard topics. It's whether they'll encounter them alone, or with a trained, able teacher guiding and supporting them in that conversation. Wouldn't it be better for a student to ask questions about a complicated topic in a classroom, where discussion is supervised and informed, instead of cluelessly searching the internet for answers or reading a book under their blanket in the dark? Instead, schools could give students and their families the choice to opt out of certain reading assignments or choose alternative, more comfortable books. That way, families—and *not* the school board—can monitor their *own* child's reading without restricting everyone else's, because ultimately, choice is better than censorship.

Book bans also raise a more serious question: who decides what's inappropriate? For example, would a book like *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe—a graphic memoir notoriously banned nationwide for the author's depictions of their exploration of gender identity and sexuality—be banned if its story were about straight people instead of queer ones? I

personally think it can be viewed as an educational book: its story teaches about the difficult journey between adolescence and adulthood and all the mortifying, sometimes scary moments that come along with it. Perhaps a student is struggling with a similar topic, and if they were to have it available to them, they could choose to pick it up and learn more about what they're going through and find the comfort and knowledge of knowing that someone out there knows *exactly* what it's like. But...what if they *don't* have that? What if *Gender Queer* is banned from their library, like it is in so many others? They're going to be left wondering "*what is going on with me*" and keep stumbling along the same confusing path of figuring out their identity and sexuality without ever realizing that there's excellent resources out there that can help them understand.

Often, when banning a book like *Gender Queer*, people rationalize it by mentioning their own religious beliefs. "It's against God" or "homosexuality is sin" is what some parts of society like to say. An organization similar to Take Back the Classroom, known as BookLooks.org, writes on their website, "God called us to this work...we pray that publishers will take up the torch and be more transparent regarding explicit content in their books." But...what if that aforementioned student doesn't agree with what BookLooks.org thinks? What if that student thinks that maybe it's okay to like boys instead of girls or vice versa, but is doubting themselves because it's "not Christian" according to everyone else? The question that nobody seems to want to talk about is just that: should a school board's religious beliefs determine what students of other religions—or no religion at all—are allowed to read? In a country supposedly built on freedom of thought, it's dangerous when one group's values limit everyone's education.

Book bans can—and tend to—deepen inequality. I attend Spring Lake High School, a relatively well-funded district. I am lucky to have teachers and librarians who create thoughtful discussions and resources that help us consider and understand complex topics.

Not every school has that advantage—especially when schools are losing librarians. According to *MEA Voice*, 46% of schools in Michigan alone have no certified full-time librarians,

ranking the state 46th in the country in librarian-to-student ratio. Book banners are failing to realize that librarians aren't just people who check out books; they're trained advocates for literary freedom. They're the ones who know how to evaluate materials, defend challenged titles, and help students find books that answer the questions they're too nervous to ask aloud—which is why these astonishing losses in Michigan schools matter more and more every day. When librarians disappear, so do the people that are there to explain context to parents, to recommend age-appropriate alternatives, or push back when books are being removed simply because they make someone a little uncomfortable. Without librarians, controversial books are easier to ban and harder for students to find. In underfunded schools, that can mean entire topics vanishing from the library, not because they aren't educational, but because there's no one left to defend them. Thus, the education gap between schools grows wider—not because of ability, but because of opportunity. Education should expand possibilities, not narrow them.

Of course, parents have a right to guide their children's reading. I'm not arguing that *nothing* should be limited in libraries...and I'm definitely *not* advocating for pornographic magazines to be put in middle schools. There without a doubt should be limitations set to protect younger students, because some books (like *Gender Queer*) are simply too mature for younger students. These concerns that parents and school boards have are genuine and deserve respect...but banning books for *everyone* isn't the solution. The solution isn't going to be easy.

Finding a solution that could protect individual students without silencing everyone's opinions is the goal, and perhaps school boards, teachers, librarians, and other interested stakeholders could work together to find this solution.

When researching banned books, I think back to my AP Literature classroom, and how fortunate I am to be able to read those books. I think about the moment when someone makes a point I never considered, or when a classmate switches sides, or when we walk out to lunch realizing we all learned something new, even if we argued about it for a while.

Those moments only happen because we're allowed to read challenging books and talk about them openly in a safe, controlled atmosphere under the supervision of our brilliant Mrs. Beebe. If those books had been banned, those conversations never would have happened. Book bans don't just remove pages from libraries. They remove opportunities—to question, to understand, to empathize, and to grow.

And that's an education no student can afford to lose.

#### Works Cited

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