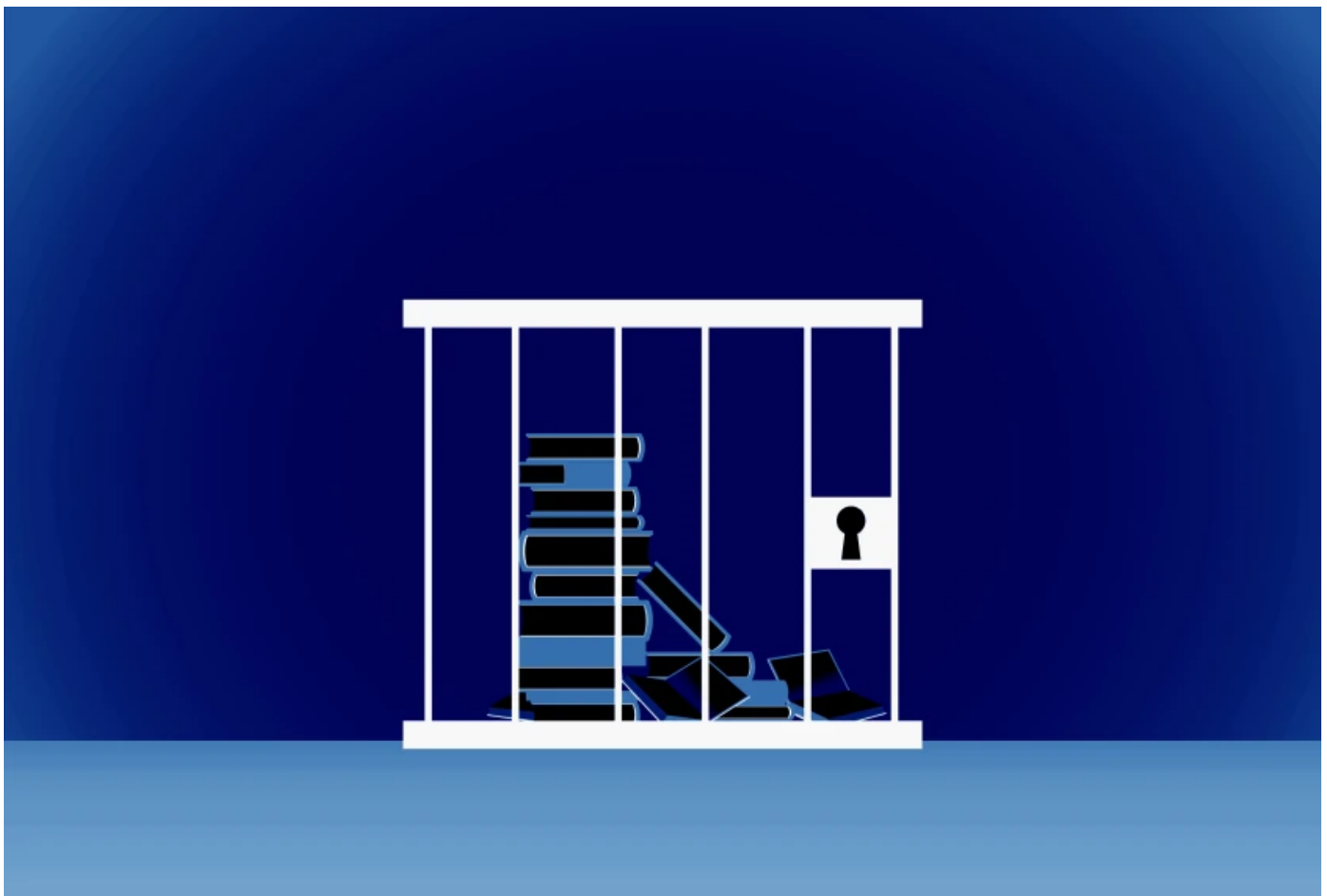


Who's Behind the Escalating Push to Ban Books? A New Report Has Answers



By Eesha Pendharkar — September 19, 2022

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As book bans in schools across the country escalate, a handful of right-wing activist organizations and Republican lawmakers are behind them, putting pressure on districts to ban books about and by LGBTQ people and people of color.

That's according to a new report by PEN America, a free speech advocacy organization. The groups pushing for books to be taken off library shelves and removed from the curriculum in school districts range from national advocacy groups with several branches across the

country, including Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, and MassResistance, to local-level Facebook groups. Together they are responsible for at least half of all bans, PEN America found.

The report identifies at least 50 different groups involved in local and state-level efforts to ban books, some with hundreds of chapters. Most of these groups have sprung up since 2021, when the current wave of objecting to books about LGBTQ people and people of color first started.

During the 2021-22 school year, nearly 140 school districts in 32 states banned more than 2,500 books, PEN America found. The latest report is an update to the one the organization released in April, and not only shows the escalating numbers of bans, but the organized efforts behind them.

The book bans represent an immense increase in the number of books banned compared with any previous years and are part of the larger movement to restrict classroom conversations and lessons about race, racism, gender identity, and sexual orientation that has been led by Republican lawmakers and conservative parent groups since 2021.

Twenty percent of all book bans over the past year were directly linked to the actions of these groups, with many more likely influenced by them, according to PEN America. That percentage is based on an analysis of news and publicly available information, such as statements at school board meetings or lists of books parents want banned.

In many of these cases, the advocacy groups also publicized their role in pushing for book removals. In an additional 30 percent of bans, there is some other evidence of the groups' likely influence, including the use of common language or tactics, such as circulating a list of books that have been banned in other districts for parents to raise objections against.

“These groups probably do not necessarily represent a range of beliefs from our democracy,” said Jonathan Friedman, the director of free expression and education programs at PEN America and author of the report. “So they’re having an outsized impact in a lot of places on what it is that everybody gets to read. And that, I think, is what’s most concerning.”

For his part, Brian Camenker, Executive Director of one of those groups, MassResistance, said he thinks free speech groups such as PEN America are “on the wrong side of history.”

He said that most books parents are complaining about and trying to get banned contain inappropriate sexual material, and that no one should be advocating for pornography in school libraries.

The pornography descriptor has been used across the country to describe books with LGBTQ themes and characters, and many librarians have refuted that claim.

“The LGBT issues, this is not necessarily a healthy behavior for libraries to be promoting on kids. And, and all of them, every one that I see involves sexuality,” he said. “The question isn’t really, who would want to ban these books, but the question is, who would want them?”

MassResistance was classified as an anti-LGBTQ+ “hate group” by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

PEN America also estimated that at least 40 percent of the bans are linked to political pressure exerted by state officials or elected lawmakers.

For example, South Carolina’s Republican Gov. Henry McMaster wrote a letter last year asking the state department of education to investigate *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, by Maia Kobabe, a graphic novel on queer identity being available at a school’s library, calling it “sexually explicit” and “pornographic.”

“What we started to see was a picture of not just book banning, but a movement behind it,” Friedman said. “In a huge number of cases, these were not individuals who were responding to just a book their own child brought home, but they were people who had lists of books they had gotten online.”

From July 2021 to June 2022, PEN America found 2,532 instances of individual books being banned from schools, affecting 1,648 different book titles. Forty-one percent of banned books—or 674 titles—explicitly address LGBTQ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ, the report says. Forty percent feature protagonists or secondary characters of color, and 21 percent of all banned titles directly address race and racism.

In the 2022-23 school year, book bans don’t seem to be slowing down. PEN America found at least 139 additional book bans that have taken effect since July 2022.

The most frequently banned books are Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, which has been banned in 41 districts, *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson, banned in 29 districts, and *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez, banned in 24 districts.

Once a book is challenged, administrators often don't ask if the book has been read or support the discretion of their professional librarians, they just remove the book to avoid further controversy, Friedman said his reading of the research showed.

Camenker from MassResistance disagreed, saying it is very hard in his experience for parents to get books removed from libraries if they raise objections to them, even after reading excerpts from these books at public meetings, because of the policies districts have in place.

Districts often have policies in place if a parent wants to challenge a book or keep their child from reading it, but this is not the system most of the advocacy groups or politicians have been following, according to Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

"What's truly needed right now is for individuals to step up and support their libraries, both in schools and in public libraries," she said.

"We need to counter this vocal minority that seems to have an outsized place on the stage and push back on the idea that having the government tell you what to think or what to read or limit what you think or read to a particular agenda imposed by an advocacy group," Caldwell-Stone said.

An ALA report from last week also documents an increase in book bans and the larger role of right-wing advocacy groups in organizing parents to challenge books that contain characters or references to LGBTQ people and people of color.

That organization identified 681 challenges to books through the first eight months of this year, involving 1,651 titles.