

A Framework for Resisting Book Bans



Premium Resource

Like many educators in the United States, we have fond memories of watching the television series *Reading Rainbow*, hosted by LeVar Burton. Originally aired in 1983 on PBS, *Reading Rainbow* helped viewers like ourselves explore a variety of books and imagine a world with endless possibilities beyond our lived experiences. Decades later, both of us still remember how each book took us on a journey exploring who we are as individuals without interference, judgment, or prejudice. The show introduced us to books that deeply enriched our lives as we developed vocabularies, learned about ourselves and the world around us, and fostered compassion and empathy.

An advocate of children's literacy, Burton has recently voiced his opposition to banning books in the U.S. He has pointed out that many communities are sharply divided over books that teach students about race, gender, and sexuality. As covered in the media, opponents of such content have passed legislation and implemented policies to ban from school reading lists and libraries books with narratives that speak to some students' identities and curiosity about the world.

In our own content analysis of media reports on educational book ban policies (currently under peer review), we found that books written by and about women and people of color are disproportionately targeted for complaints and removal, restricting students' access to the perspectives of an important segment of America's population. Due to mounting political pressures, harassment, and even death threats, some teachers and administrators have had to recalibrate their curriculum plans and determine if such texts will be viewed as unpatriotic, anti-police, pornographic, or anti-white.

In 2021, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (2022) counted 729 book challenges against 1,597 books in U.S. public schools and libraries. That same year, PEN America noted that 54 bills were proposed in 22 states aimed at banning books in the classroom. Before the end of 2022, legislators in 36 states had proposed 137 additional book-restriction bills. For example, Texas State Representative Matt Kraus brought forth a list of 850 "questionable" books that was subsequently utilized by school administrators across the state to ban these books. Meanwhile, Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law imposed a ban on teaching content and curriculum related to gender and sexuality from kindergarten through 3rd grade. States including Idaho, Iowa, and Tennessee have introduced bills to criminalize educators and librarians for using books that some consider offensive and developmentally inappropriate (Harris, 2022; Hytrek, 2022; Jones, 2022). In Wyoming, law enforcement has considered charging librarians with disseminating "obscene" material, in violation of local child-sex laws (Riley, 2021).

The depth and intensity of book-restricting practices have created barriers to rich content and curricular availability, impacting students' opportunities to explore their lives, their histories, and their communities. When students' lived experiences are erased from the books they read, it can cause racial trauma (Jones, 2020). When students' learning isn't contextualized in ways that help them make sense of their actual experiences outside of school, they can feel confusion and disassociation from the classroom (Gay, 2018). When students aren't able to comprehend the lived experiences of others, it can increase racial tension, bullying, and other forms of physical and psychological marginalization, harming the learning environment (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Book banning can keep students from developing a critical understanding of their sociopolitical context and preparing to engage civically in a democracy.

The Critical Inclusivity Framework

Education leaders play a fundamental role in shaping curricular expectations and students' access to books. They can counteract the current political context to advance critical and inclusive student- and community-centered curriculum. Through our research on book-banning policies, we developed a *critical inclusivity framework* with five concurrent leadership practices to reclaim contested curriculum materials: (1) research student and community voices, (2) read the books, (3) reinforce formal reviews and the law, (4) reemphasize relevancy, and (5) reaffirm expectations for inclusivity. This framework aims to prepare education leaders to handle ongoing book challenges and navigate the constant political pressures forcing schools to put curriculum about diversity, equity, inclusivity, and social justice on the back burner. The leadership practices of this framework are intended to serve as tools for strategic and navigational consideration. The framework is by no means intended to dismiss or ignore the complexities of changing political contexts that can vary by community.

1. Research Student and Community Perceptions

Time and again we have seen book-banning advocates disrupt school board meetings, asserting their agenda despite not having children attending in the district. And yet, according to a 2022 survey conducted on behalf of the American Library Association, 71 percent of Americans are not in favor of banning books and believe libraries do a good job offering diverse viewpoints. There are also many examples of students pushing back against book restrictions that they see as censoring their identities (Park, 2022).

Student and community voices can be a strong source of evidence regarding whether calls for book censorship are representative of and consistent with the perspectives of the community. As former administrators ourselves, we believe school and district leaders should utilize an annual family needs assessment survey as a starting point to learn about families' expectations of the school and the extent to which families support or oppose each school's reading list and instructional goals. These surveys can also help leaders counteract rumors about the alleged usage of certain books. Some districts have curriculum nights at the beginning of the school year where families are invited to learn and ask questions about the books each teacher will be covering.

Another key finding from our research is that students' voices have largely been excluded from public debate about banned books. We believe schools should proactively elicit students' voices as a regular practice, prior to book challenges. In English language arts classrooms, teachers can engage in participatory action research with their students to elicit open dialogue about the book-banning political climate and collectively conduct investigations about the educational value of district-approved books and their impact on learning. This type of activity can be made accessible even to young elementary students. A teacher we know in Iowa implemented an age-appropriate survey with a range of smiley and sad faces as a rating scale to capture 1st-graders' perceptions of the district's approved curriculum and their school. Research has shown such activities can empower students to be a part of the fact-finding and decision-making process in their schools (González et al., 2019). After collecting multiple data points, leaders can share their findings with the community and use this evidence when responding to complaints about books.

2. Read the Books

School and district leaders must make informed decisions by reading targeted or controversial books in their entirety prior to taking action. In our research on book bans, we have found that the challenged books have often not even been read by the complainants or district personnel. In Florida, the Walton County superintendent banned a cluster of "inappropriate books" based solely on a complaint and booklist from a conservative organization, without personally reading any of the books or investigating the legitimacy of the complaint.

Our research also found that parents and political interest groups are adept at decontextualizing selected passages to create public misperceptions about books' overall narratives. These passages then become political talking points to create cases for banning specific books from schools and libraries.

For example, the children's picture book *Something Happened in Our Town* (Magination, 2018) was weaponized by the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association when the book's passages about a Black man being shot by the police were misconstrued as "promoting anti-police views." The complaint concealed the fact that the book was written by three child psychologists who emphasized that, "There are many cops, Black and white, who make good choices" and "most police officers never fire their guns during their whole careers because they try to solve problems without violence." As part of the evaluation process, challenged books must be assessed in their entirety. Education leaders must be familiar with the books so that their interpretations can corroborate or dispute claims. These complaints should be treated as opinions—not facts—until further corroborated by critical readings of the texts. School leaders also need to lean into these opportunities as ways to reaffirm their instructional and curricular goals. We need education leaders to reposition themselves from reacting on the fly to book-banning hostilities to making evidence-based curricular decisions.

3. Reinforce Formal Reviews and Legal Precedent

Much of the proposed state legislation and book-restriction bills are intentionally vague, casting a wide net and causing confusion, leading educators to doubt their own instructional expertise and curricular knowledge. To better support teachers and school librarians, school and district leaders must clearly align their formal review processes and decision making with longstanding federal law on the role of public education. Specifically, common law and case law in the U.S. has protected education's role in supporting children's rights to become independently thinking members of society (Schneider & Berkshire, 2021). Conversely, parents hold the right to review their children's education and can opt out of the system to seek private alternatives.

Moreover, reading books in public schools and libraries is a broadly accepted right protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which safeguards individuals' freedom to pursue knowledge and limits local school boards' authority to dictate access to books. And the U.S. Supreme Court has consistently ruled against banning books in public schools (*Board of Education v. Pico*, 1982).

When education leaders engage in the processes of evaluating books based on formal complaints, they must uphold constitutional rights and legal precedence. To ensure due process, a review committee consisting of families, students, teachers, community leaders, school counselors, and administrators should investigate the concerns about and merits of challenged books. The committee members should work together to ensure that the formal review process results in sound educational decisions without catering to individual demands.

Such processes are also a way for parents to hold districts accountable when considering book bans. In Pennsylvania, parent and teacher Ann Parham called on the school board to uphold their own policies on reviewing and censoring books. She pointed to the district's failure to formally review 27 books removed from the school libraries, prompting the school board to reverse course and follow their own guidelines for review (Porter, 2022). The National Coalition Against Censorship (2019) has a recommended review process that we consider detailed and rigorous, offering clear and actionable guidelines.

4. Reemphasize Relevancy

School and district leaders must also revisit state curricular standards to inform how students will ultimately be supported in their ability to connect content knowledge to their understanding of their world. Book banners have consistently argued that books covering sensitive issues around race, gender, and sexuality are forms of indoctrination, but such propaganda often undermines teachers' abilities to connect the standards to students' identities and lived experiences. For example, book bans could restrict or even eliminate teachers' capacity to implement the K–12 ethnic studies requirements in nine states. Further, bans could theoretically implicate 60 high schools across the U.S. that offer Advanced Placement African American Studies (Bellamy, 2022).

Our research finds that curricular standards, which are often broadly defined, can be tools to rebuff book challenges. As such, education leaders can emphasize their adherence to the standards, which

require students to develop critical and analytical thinking skills, to substantiate their district's choices of books that are culturally relevant to their students. Ideally, educators should have the curricular flexibility to utilize selected books to contextualize both the content and the standards, all while appealing to students' interests, identities, and real-world knowledge. Without this flexibility, opportunities for students to be academically challenged can be drastically constrained.

5. Reaffirm Expectations for Inclusivity

Education leaders need to work alongside their community to reflect on and reevaluate their collective curricular expectations, as a means of advancing inclusivity and an equitable school climate. This process requires leaders to ask hard questions about the extent to which their curricula has been inclusive, equitable, and representative of the rich histories and communities of this country and beyond.

Consider reflecting on the following questions as a part of an annual audit with your school community:

- Are the selection and review of content and curriculum consistent with national and state standards and laws?
- How does the current selection of books and curriculum help the school community leverage and expand on students' analytical, critical-thinking, and problem-solving skills?
- How do these skills help advance students' understanding of their lived experiences related to diversity, equity, inclusivity, and social justice across core content areas?
- How can the school further center critical inclusivity to establish curricular conditions that support students in performing toward higher expectations?

Audit results should bring to light whether the district's curricular offerings are consistent with the aforementioned internal research to account for student and community voices and the extent to which these curricular expectations emphasize standards and relevancy. Education leaders should use these findings to take the following actions: (1) collaborate with members of their school community to realign expectations, and (2) facilitate curricular and instructional changes with all relevant partners.

Centering Critical Inclusivity in Curriculum

As a heterogeneous society, America will continue to evolve and transform. Leaders in school systems have the responsibility to help their communities understand that banning certain books will not keep students from understanding the relevance of race, gender, and sexuality in society. They must also work with their community to reject the idea that book selection can be fair and balanced if the education system stops teaching topics from the perspectives of those who are disproportionately impacted. From an equity perspective, book banning targeting specific populations can induce a sense of superiority and inferiority and affect students' standing in the school community.

Most of all, education leaders must support the critical engagement of knowledge through all forms of identities, lived experiences, expressions, and contributions. Reading Rainbow's LeVar Burton puts it best: "Read the books they don't want you to. That's where the good stuff is. ... Read banned books!"