

CHRON.

Conservative web sites are fueling book bans in Texas and across the country

Right-wing entities like No Left Turn in Education are providing lists, guidelines and apps for challenging books in local school districts.

Ariana Garcia

Feb. 25, 2022

Book bans are not a new phenomenon in the United States, but recent efforts to remove books in schools in Texas and across the country have made an aggressive comeback over the past year. The American Library Association reported it received an “unprecedented” 330 reports of book challenges in fall, an uptick from the same periods in recent years.

The current movement has been largely driven by conservative parents, activists and politicians campaigning against critical race theory, an academic concept used to explore the role of race in society. To date, more than half of book challenges are initiated by parents compared to 1 percent of students, the ALA reports.

In Texas last week, two parents in the McKinney Independent School District challenged more books in a single day than the record number of books previously challenged over the course of an entire year.

The parents requested the district remove 282 books with alleged obscene sexual content from its libraries after claiming they underwent the “unpleasant task” of reading each of the books. All 282 works are also on a list of 850 titles compiled by Republican state legislator Matt Krause as part of an inquiry launched in October into books he believed might make students feel uncomfortable.

Krause's list, which targets many texts with LGBTQ themes, has successfully prompted several large-scale book removals in Texas schools. Books on the list oftentimes coincide with titles being challenged in other states. This largely due to concerted efforts from right-wing organizations like Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education and Texans Wake Up to circulate book lists online of titles that they have deemed inappropriate.

From these lists, parents and activists find the most explicit passages and recite them at school board meetings out of context, asking schools if the books are available to their children.

Among frequently listed titles is the 2015 young adult novel “Out of Darkness” by Ashley Hope Pérez. The book, described as a fictional reimagining of the 1937 New London explosion that killed more 295 people “as a backdrop for a riveting novel about segregation, love, family, and the forces that destroy people,” has been challenged in at least eight districts in Texas, and at least eight different states.

The conservative web site Texans Wake Up, which dubbed Pérez’s book “pervasively vulgar,” contains passages of the book, a list of profane words that can be found in it (including a word count of each) and Texas school districts that have the book stocked in their libraries. The guide is downloadable for use at school board meetings.

A parent from the Austin-based Lake Travis Independent School District went viral after reciting the same passages featured on the web site during a school board meeting as she requested removal of the book from middle school shelves. The next day, the book was pulled from libraries for review.

No Left Turn in Education, another group leading the charge, has circulated a list of more than 75 books it says “spread radical and racist ideologies to students.” Nearly all of the featured books are about Black or LGBTQ stories, including the title “All Boys Aren’t Blue” by George M. Johnson which has been targeted for removal in at least 14 states. The list also features classics like Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale.”

Parents Defending Education, which promotes No Left Turn in Education, likewise has its own list of books, many of which have been frequently targeted in Texas such as “Lawn Boy” by Jonathan Evison and “Gender Queer: A Memoir” by Maia Kobabe. Gov. Greg Abbott referenced the latter novel when introducing his Parental Bill of Rights that would ban alleged “pornographic” material in school libraries.

In January, The Guardian reported that most of these groups are also linked to right-wing politicians and wealthy Republican donors. Parents Defending Education president Nicole Neilly was previously the executive director of the conservative organization Independent Women’s Forum. Neilly also worked at the Cato Institute, a right-wing thinktank co-founded by Republican mega-donor Charles Koch, according to The Guardian.

“We’ve noted that there are a number of groups like Moms for Liberty, Parents Defending Education, No Left Turn in Education that have particular views on what is appropriate for young people, and they’re trying to implement their agenda – particularly in schools, but also taking their concerns to public libraries as well,” said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, to The Guardian.

However, such widespread book banning efforts have not gone unchallenged. This week, students in Katy ISD, which made national headlines for several book challenges this school

year, distributed hundreds of copies of banned books that discuss race and the LGBTQ experiences to their peers after the district removed some library books and blocked certain web sites from being accessed on campus, according to the Houston Chronicle.

Texas librarians launched the organization #FReadom Fighters shortly after Krause's book list went public. The group has since provided resources for librarians, teachers or authors facing book challenges. A February CBS News poll shows that 80 percent of Americans don't think books should be banned from schools for discussing race and criticizing U.S. history, for depicting slavery in the past or more broadly for political ideas with which they disagree.