



US conservatives linked to rich donors wage campaign to ban books from schools

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Conservative groups across the US, often linked to deep-pocketed rightwing donors, are carrying out a campaign to ban books from school libraries, often focused on works that address race, LGBTQ issues or marginalized communities.

Literature has already been removed from schools in Texas, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia and Wyoming. Librarians and teachers warn the trend is on the increase, as groups backed by wealthy Republican donors use centrally drawn up tactics and messaging to harangue school districts into removing certain texts.

In October, the Texas state representative Matt Krause sent a list of 850 books to school districts, asking that they report how many copies they have of each title and how much had been spent on those books.

The Texas Tribune reported that the books included two by Ta-Nehisi Coates; LGBT Families by Leanne K Currie-McGhee; and 'Pink is a Girl Color' ... and Other Silly Things People Say, a children's book by Stacy and Erik Drageset. Krause's list sparked panic in schools, and by December a district in San Antonio said it was reviewing 414 titles in its libraries.

In Pennsylvania, the Central York school board banned a long list of books, almost entirely titles by, or about, people of color, including books by Jacqueline Woodson, Ijeoma Oluo and Ibram X Kendi, and children's titles about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. "Let's just call it what it is – every author on that list is a Black voice," one teacher told the York Dispatch.

Four high schools in Utah's Canyons school district removed copies of at least nine books, the Deseret News reported, including *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe; *the Bluest Eye*, a book by the Pulitzer winner Toni Morrison that addresses racial and gender oppression; and *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez, a story about romance in a racially divided 1930s Texas.

Groups purporting to be “grassroots” efforts have frequently led the charge, petitioning school boards or elected officials to remove certain books. Though some of these organizations present themselves as a local effort that sprang up around groups of parents united behind a cause, many of the groups involved in banning books are in fact linked, and backed by influential conservative donors.

Most of the books relate to race or gender equality, at a time when some Republicans are mounting an effort to prevent teaching on race in schools by launching a loud campaign against critical race theory, an academic discipline that examines the ways in which racism operates in US laws and society.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, said the number of attempts to ban books had soared through 2021.

“What's unique is it appears to be an organized effort by a number of advocacy groups to activate members in local chapters to challenge books in school libraries and public libraries in the United States,” she said.

“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.”

Caldwell-Stone said ALA received 156 book challenges – an attempt to remove or restrict one or more books – in 2020. In the last three months of 2021 alone, the organization saw 330 book challenges.

In most incidents there is a common format. According to the conservative groups, one parent of a child at school has spotted an allegedly unsuitable book, and has raised the alarm. But the movement is far from organic.

The name Moms for Liberty might suggest a homely, kitchen-table effort. In reality, Moms for Liberty is associated with other supposed grassroots groups backed by conservative donors, who appear to be driving the book-banning effort.

Moms for Liberty groups are promoted on the website of Parents Defending Education (PDE), another conservative group, and in May Moms for Liberty joined with PDE to write a letter to Miguel Cardona, the US education secretary, expressing concerns over federal efforts to include teaching about the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans in US society.

Moms for Liberty did not respond to a request for comment.

Asra Nomani, PDE's vice-president for strategy and investigations, has appeared on Fox News to rail against some books, including Woke Baby and Gender Queer, being in Virginia libraries, and PDE carries a list of books it deems problematic on its website.

PDE, which launched in spring of 2021, has emerged as one of the key organizations in the conservative fight for influence in public schools. The group describes itself as a “grassroots organization”, but has ties to deep-pocket conservative money and influence.

PDE's president, Nicole Neilly, was previously the executive director of the Independent Women's Forum and worked at the Cato Institute, a rightwing thinktank co-founded by Republican mega-donor Charles Koch. The Intercept reported that the IWF has received large donations from Republican donor Leonard Leo, a former vice-president of the Koch-funded Federalist Society who advised Donald Trump on judicial appointments.

PDE's website offers templates as to how aggrieved people can get involved. The group is behind an effort to create a web of coordinated Instagram pages that highlight perceived liberal bias at specific schools, and offers a step-by-step guide to doing the same, from how to create a specific gmail address to match the mission to how to describe the instagram account. The guide advises: “For the ‘full name’ field, use ‘Woke at [school name].’ For the ‘username’ field, use ‘wokeat[school name].’”

PDE, which has also railed against critical race theory, even tells parents they should spy on teachers' online activity to seek incriminating material.

“Look at the social media pages of teachers and administrators at your school. They are often quite proud of what they're doing and sometimes post incriminating statements or materials,” PDE's website says.

Another aim, beyond banning books, is exposed in PDE's efforts to encourage conservative parents to run for school boards – an often ignored position that wields a considerable amount of power.

PDE offers a guide on how parents can run, and while also describing how to gain influence on Parent Teacher Student Associations. It even offers specific questions disgruntled parents can pose to their school boards.

PDE did not respond to a request for comment.

No Left Turn in Education, whose chapters are promoted on PDE's website, is another of the groups leading the charge. No Left Turn's website contains a list of more than 60 books it deems inappropriate.

Again, the group has links to deep-pocketed conservatives. The Milwaukee Journal reported that Elana Fishbein, No Left Turn in Education's founder, has provided free legal representation for

parents wishing to challenge school districts. According to Journal, most of those lawyers are affiliated with the Liberty Justice Center and Pacific Legal Foundation, which receive funding from the prominent GOP donor Dick Uihlein, a Wisconsin-based billionaire.

No Left Turn in Education did not respond to requests for comment.

The banning of books about race or LGBTQ issues does not just affect those communities, said Kim Anderson, executive director of the National Education Association. It also withholds the opportunity for all students to learn “an honest and accurate truth of our history”.

“Censoring the full history of America impacts all of us as a country,” Anderson said.

“If we’re not willing to embrace the beauty of America, which is that our diversity is our strength, then we weaken the core idea of America. So it’s offensive, certainly, to people of color and other Americans who have traditionally been marginalized, but ultimately we’re short-changing every single student if we don’t tell the truth.”

In Texas, Krause, who was running for state attorney general when he released his list of 850 books – he has since dropped out of the race – did not respond to the Guardian’s questions about how he came up with his list of books.

Krause told Education Week he chose to act after school boards began reviewing books of “an inappropriate nature”.

“None of us wants grossly inappropriately material in our schools,” he said.

As the conservative effort has grown, there has been pushback in many states, from authors, teachers, librarians and students. Carolyn Foote, a library advocate who co-founded the group FReadom Fighters to push back against banning efforts, said the conservative efforts represent a “danger to democracy”.

“The supreme court protects young people’s right to choose library materials to read as a first amendment right. It also is growing to include more and more titles, which is concerning, and a minority of parents are impacting all students,” Foote said.

The Pennsylvania ban was overturned in September 2021 after students protested outside their York County high school and outside school board meetings. In Virginia, high school students managed to overturn the Spotsylvania book ban in similar fashion, while Caldwell-Stone said the ALA will continue to highlight the book-banning efforts.

“We don’t oppose the ability of parents to guide their children’s reading,” she said.

“What we have deep concerns about is one parent, or one small group of parents, making decisions for an entire community about what is appropriate reading, based on their own moral and religious values.”