Deciding What Books Students Read in School

Decisions about books and other reading materials in school libraries is a contested political issue. In the following activity, you will design a digital library for your school while considering the roles of teachers, administrators, public interest groups, elected representatives, voters and students in choosing educational materials for classrooms and libraries.

Who decides what books students can read in school? This question has emerged as a hotly debated political issue at local, state, and national levels.

Beginning in 2021- 2022, multiple states (including Texas, Arizona, and Nebraska) and numerous school districts across the country have passed laws mandating parent or family involvement in selecting what books young learners can read at school ([Students Lose Access to Books Amid 'State-Sponsored Purging of Ideas'](), *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2022).

The organization Pen America found 2,532 instances of bans on 1,648 titles between July 2021 and June 2022; an interactive map of book bans is included in their report: "[Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools]()" (2022).

- For more information on book bans, read [Banned Books Week 2022: Defend the Right to Study People's History]() from the Zinn Education Project.

In some cases, parents receive an email notification when their child checks out a book from the school library or when a parental sign-off is required. In other cases, parents have been given power to restrict or remove books from a school, particularly those that deal with race, gender, and identity topics ([Legislation of Concern](), everylibrary, 2022). In some places, students cannot select a book from entire sections of a library.

Proponents argue that book control legislation increases family and parent involvement in children's education. Parents, they argue, have a right to make reading content choices for their children.

Opponents regard book regulation rules as state-sponsored censorship of ideas for political purposes. Libraries exist, they say, to promote choice and the free flow of competing ideas. Blocking access dramatically curtails learning for students.

"[Books in a shopping cart in a library](#)" by Jorge Royan is licensed under CC BY SA 3.0

How are books and other reading materials selected for your school library?

Traditionally, following long-standing policies and norms, school librarians, in consultation with teachers and school administrators, chose titles for a library. Librarians often rely on book reviews by national organizations such as the [American Library Association](#), the National Council for the Social Studies, and the National Council of Teachers of English, as well as recommendations listed in statewide curriculum frameworks.

The latest round of book control legislation is drastically changing how these decisions are made. New groups are involved in either directly making decisions or pressuring those responsible for book choices. [Natanson and Rozsa (2022)](#) reported that some parent groups are authoring their own reviews of books, claiming professional reviews cannot be trusted.

On the other side of the issue, teens in Texas have formed Banned Book Clubs to ensure that students can read what they choose to read. In addition, there are also lawsuits under way to restore books that have been removed from local schools ([Natanson and Rozsa, 2022](#)).

In theory, under the nation's long tradition of local control of education, selecting books for school classrooms and libraries is a matter of democratic decision-making by local people. The idea is that people should decide how schools can best function in their communities. However, historically local control has resulted in grave inequities including racial segregation and gender inequalities. Supreme Court decisions (eg, *Brown v. Board of Education*) and federal legislation (eg. Americans with Disabilities Act) have sought to counteract (only somewhat successfully) longstanding discriminations against low-income communities and students of color.

Activity: Design a Digital Library for Your School

- Interview school librarians, teachers, and administrators to learn about how books are selected for your school library.
- Then, explore the books currently available in your library (are any of these banned, censored, or challenged books included? Why do you think that is?).
- Design a digital library for your school. This can be as simple as a spreadsheet of books available in your school library or as creative as a Glide app or website for your library.
  - When designing your digital library, consider:
    - What books are included? Why do you think those books are included?
    - What books are missing? Why do you think that is?
    - Whose voices, stories, and experiences are featured and whose are left out in the books?
    - How might you might the book selection more inclusive?

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

- Design a Digital Library for Your School by Alexa Sortino (Slides)
- Design a Digital Library for Your School by Alexa Sortino (Docx)

Additional Resources

- Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools
- Banned Books Week
- Pushing Back on Book Banning and Censorship. Middleweb (September 26, 2022)
- Teachers, Students And The Central York Community Defeated A Racist Book Ban In Their School District
- Back in the USSR: New High School Textbooks in Russia Whitewash Stalin's Terror as Putin Wages War in Historical Memory, The Conversation (January 23, 2024)

Connecting to the Building Democracy for All eBook

Building Democracy for All: A Short History of American Public Education

Censorship of Words and Ideas: The Campaign Against Comic Books in the 1950s and Book Banning in the U.S. Today

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