# The bonfire of gay-friendly books in US schools heats up to include classics like To Kill a Mockingbird!



Restrictions on books in public schools across the United States have surged to unprecedented levels, becoming so commonplace that they are described as a 'routine and expected part of school operations,' according to a recent report by PEN America, a prominent free speech organisation. The volume and frequency of these bans have increased dramatically over the past four years, leading to a societal desensitisation towards the issue, with many Americans developing a sense of numbness not only to book bans but broader restrictions on education within public schools.

Kasey Meehan, director of PEN America's Freedom to Read programme, emphasises that the phenomenon has evolved from isolated local disputes over specific books to widespread, state-driven censorship. States like Florida have enacted legislation that simplifies the process of banning books, which in turn has had a chilling effect on school districts. Many officials, fearing non-compliance with new laws, have resorted to proactively removing books from shelves. This trend has escalated to the federal level as well, with the Department of Defense Education Activity, responsible for schools serving military families, reportedly removing nearly 600 titles following executive orders related to educational content from the Trump administration. This move has sparked legal challenges, including an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit citing First Amendment violations due to the banning of notable works such as Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird and Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner.

A key focal point within these bans remains books featuring LGBTQ+ themes. The US Supreme Court recently upheld a policy allowing parents with religious objections to opt their children out of classroom instruction involving such topics, further complicating access to diverse literature. PEN America's research for the 2024–25 school year identified over 3,750 unique titles banned across 87 school districts, contributing to a total of nearly 23,000 documented cases of book banning in 45 states since 2021. Experts caution that these figures likely underestimate the true scale, as they rely on publicly available data, including district websites and journalist reports.

Historically, schools and libraries have had established review processes for managing collections, but recent pressures from parent and activist groups seeking ultimate control over reading material have intensified. According to Meehan, this shift sometimes undermines the agency of other parents and students. For example, in Utah, a book banned in just three districts results in a statewide prohibition across all 41 districts, a decision made by elected officials and not reflective of the diverse opinions held by communities and educators throughout the state.

PEN America's criteria for categorising a book as banned include its removal from circulation, even temporarily during review periods, as well as cases where access is significantly restricted. Among the most frequently banned books for 2024–25 are well-known titles such as Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange, Jennifer Niven’s coming-of-age novel Breathless, and Sold by Patricia McCormick, which deals with child trafficking in Nepal. National Book Award-winning works like Malinda Lo’s queer YA novel Last Night at the Telegraph Club are also prominently targeted, underscoring the sustained censorship of narratives concerning race, sexuality, and gender. Some titles that were once frequently banned, like Maia Kobabe’s graphic memoir Gender Queer, have seen a decline on the banned lists, likely because they are no longer readily available in many schools.

Comprehensive PEN America data shows that the surge in bans correlates strongly with attempts to censor content addressing race, racism, LGBTQ+ identities, and other sensitive subjects, reinforcing concerns about ideological and political motivations behind these efforts. Florida alone accounts for over 40% of the incidents recorded during the 2022–23 school year, with states such as Texas, Missouri, Utah, and Pennsylvania also featuring prominently.

The organisation’s reports highlight the broader educational and societal implications of these censorship trends. They warn that the widespread removal of books curtails students' exposure to diverse perspectives, limiting the critical thinking and empathy development essential for a robust democratic society. PEN America's ongoing advocacy underscores the urgent need to address these crises to protect the fundamental right to read freely and to maintain inclusive, representative educational materials. Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/rampant-book-bans-are-being-taken-for-granted-free-speech-group-warns/?utm_source=RSS&utm_medium=Referral&utm_campaign=RSS_all> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://pen.org/report/book-bans-pressure-to-censor/> - PEN America's report, 'Banned in the USA: The Mounting Pressure to Censor', highlights a significant increase in book bans in public K–12 schools during the 2022–23 school year, with 3,362 instances recorded—a 33% rise from the previous year. Florida led with over 40% of all bans, followed by Texas, Missouri, Utah, and Pennsylvania. The bans predominantly targeted books addressing race, racism, LGBTQ+ themes, and sensitive topics like physical abuse and grief, reflecting a broader trend of censorship in educational settings.
3. <https://pen.org/press-release/latest-pen-america-report-finds-disturbing-normalization-of-book-bans-in-public-schools/> - PEN America's October 2025 report, 'Latest PEN America Report Finds “Disturbing Normalization” of Book Bans in Public Schools', documents nearly 23,000 cases of book bans across 45 states and 451 school districts since 2021. The report highlights the expansion of censorship pressures, including federal efforts to restrict education and state-mandated bans. It emphasizes the normalization of book banning, with a significant impact on students' freedom to read and access diverse perspectives.
4. <https://pen.org/book-bans/> - PEN America tracks and combats book bans in public schools and libraries across the United States. Their research reveals a surge in book bans, with over 10,000 instances recorded in the 2023–2024 school year. The bans predominantly target books by authors of colour, LGBTQ+ authors, and women, covering themes of race, sexuality, gender, and history. PEN America advocates for the freedom to read and opposes censorship efforts that restrict access to diverse literature.
5. <https://pen.org/book-bans/banned-books-press-kit/> - PEN America's Banned Books Press Kit provides comprehensive data on book bans in U.S. public schools. During the 2024–2025 school year, PEN America documented 6,870 instances of book bans across 23 states and 87 public school districts. Since 2021, nearly 16,000 book bans have been recorded nationwide. The press kit includes resources, research reports, and information on how to report book bans, underscoring the organization's commitment to defending the freedom to read.
6. <https://pen.org/report/beyond-the-shelves/> - PEN America's report, 'Banned in the USA: Beyond the Shelves', examines the intensifying efforts to remove certain books from school libraries over the past three school years. The 2023–2024 school year saw a record 10,046 instances of book bans, with Florida and Iowa leading in the number of bans. The report highlights the broader implications of censorship on public education and the chilling effect on educators and students.