



# Intellectual Freedom Committee

Oregon Library Association

## Tuesday Topics: July 2023

*Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) or a guest writer.*

*Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC.*

### **Securing the Right to Read**

An antiquated Norse word for “librarian” translates to “book dragon,” a moniker highlighting the necessity to guard books as treasure. Fast forward to 2023, and the need to protect library materials has grown to astonishing proportions. The drive to censor materials, ban books, and criminalize librarians is at an [all-time high](#). This censorship is often cloaked in fear-mongering, under the guise of [parental rights](#). Horrific accusations have been spread through media outlets in order to legitimize prejudice under the guise of “protection,” a tactic that should worry anyone who has studied historical atrocities. Proponents argue that they are simply ensuring only “appropriate” literature is carried in libraries. With [BIPOC and LGBTQ+ authors and works](#) as the most common targets, one can deduce that the term “appropriate” is only what the complainants narrowly define. Those that wish to ban books pontificate loudly at library and school board meetings that public shelves are teeming with pornographic works. A quick check of [books recently banned and censored](#) shows many prohibited titles have nothing to do with sexual content of any kind. Books denied the right to be placed on library shelves include those on subjects such as health, race, and items featuring historical events.

### **Pushing Back on Book Bans**

Book bans are overwhelmingly unpopular with the American public. In fact, over [70% of Americans strongly oppose the banning of books](#). So, how is this censorship occurring? Organization. The small group of individuals who are actively seeking to remove library holdings are vocal, employing social media campaigns to raise ire and stir outrage. Just how minute are these groups? Many selections are pulled from library shelves on the bequest of just [one or two complainants](#). In May, *The Washington Post* reported [60% of book challenges](#) across the nation were filed by just 11 individuals.

Researching the [number of attempted and actual acts of censorship](#) in public and school libraries, as well as [tracking bills that are meant to hamper library access and criminalize librarians](#), can be bleak. Nevertheless, the drive to combat these bans has become increasingly more pronounced. Recently, numerous measures have been proposed and installed in order to safeguard library holdings and defend librarianship. Here are several of note:

## **New York’s Freedom to Read Act**

[Senate Bill S6350B](#) introduced in April, and [strongly supported by New York senators](#), would amend the New York education law to empower school librarians to curate diverse material collections to best support their students with “the widest array of developmentally appropriate materials available to participating schools.”

## **The Federal Right to Read Act**

Also in April, Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) reintroduced the [Right to Read Act](#). In addition to solidifying the freedoms of individuals to access materials, this act would increase literacy grant funding, provide protection for educators and school librarians, and “ensure all U.S. students have access to a school library staffed by a certified school librarian.”

## **Access to Curricular Materials**

On May 25th, nine state governors sent a [joint letter to textbook publishers](#) highlighting the need to offer students factual curricular information that has not been diluted or altered to appease “political pressure.” The letter proclaims, “The negative impact that censorship and book-banning has on this nation’s students – many already marginalized and underrepresented in society – cannot be overstated during a time when we are facing an unprecedented youth mental health crisis.”

## **California Educational Rights**

California Governor Gavin Newsom, State Attorney General Rob Bonta, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond sent out [a letter](#) on June 1st to all California school superintendents outlining legal precedent for refuting the banning of books “to preserve freedom and ensure access to diverse perspectives and curricula.”

## **Illinois Takes Legislative Action to Prevent Book Bans**

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker made a giant leap forward in thwarting efforts to remove books, signing into legislation [House Bill 2789](#) on June 12th. First in the nation, this law protects the right to read for over 12.5 million Illinois residents, prohibiting attempts to ban books in public libraries, encompassing both school and community. There are severe consequences for facilitating censorship: libraries will lose state funding if books are pulled for “partisan or individual doctrinal disapproval” or if libraries do not adhere to the affirmations held within the [American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights](#). In signing HB2789, [Governor Pritzker](#) stated, “Everyone deserves to see themselves reflected in the books they read, the art they see, the history they learn. In Illinois, we are showing the nation what it really looks like to stand up for liberty.”

## **Connecticut Sanctuary Libraries**

On June 26th, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed [SB 00002](#), which offers financial assistance to designated “sanctuary libraries” in every municipality to assure patron access to “[any book that has been banned, censored, or challenged by a person, organization and entity](#).”

## **Oregon**

Oregon’s Constitution provides for strong intellectual protections under [Article 1, Section 8](#), which covers Freedom of Speech and Press, declaring: “No law shall be passed restraining the free expression of opinion, or restricting the right to speak, write, or print freely on any subject whatever; but every person shall be responsible for the abuse of this right.” Additionally, both Oregon [public](#) and [school libraries](#) have standards

articulating the need to follow [ALA guidelines](#) for emphasizing intellectual and academic freedom. [The Oregon Public Library Standards](#), under Governance, 1.1 Services and Leadership, proclaim: “Community members can safely exercise their intellectual freedom rights in the library, as granted to them by the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution and Article I of the Oregon Constitution.” Furthermore, the Oregon Department of Education has outlined strong support for these freedoms in the newly updated [Addressing Challenged Materials in K-12 Education: Guidance to School Districts](#), affirming, “Diversity should be reflected in basal instructional, supplemental, teacher-selected, and library materials. Every student needs the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the materials they are exposed to and to have access to materials featuring people, backgrounds, and identities different from their own.”

Despite the solid safeguards in place in Oregon, [book challenges continue](#) to occur. One of the most important components to combating challenges is to report the issue to the [Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse \(OIFC\)](#). Respondents may remain anonymous or give their contact information to receive assistance from the [Oregon Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee \(IFC\)](#). The [IFC Toolkit](#) also provides pertinent information about laws that defend the right to read and resources to address material challenges.

## **Presidential Responses to Combat Book Bans**

Neera Tanden, White House Domestic Policy Adviser, announced June 8th that the Biden administration will be appointing an “[anti-book ban](#)” [Education Department coordinator](#). This newly-established coordinator will be tasked with training school districts on preventing book bans and the legalities of violating student civil rights through the removal of library materials. Tanden asserted, “Book banning erodes our democracy, removes vital resources for student learning and can contribute to the stigma and isolation that many communities face.”

Published July 17th, [President Barack Obama’s open letter of support](#) to American librarians stresses the validity of libraries which “provide spaces where people can come together, share ideas, participate in community programs, and access essential civic and educational resources.” The letter accentuates the need for all individuals to be able to freely access books in libraries that represent themselves, as well as view pieces that reflect those who are different. President Obama concludes, “Finally, to every citizen reading this, I hope you’ll join me in reminding anyone who will listen—and even some people you think might not—that the free, robust exchange of ideas has always been at the heart of American democracy. Together, we can make that true for generations to come.”