

Why Should I Care About Book Bans?

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Image 1. Why are these books worth reading?

“Books are the primary way to tell stories—to learn right from the mouths of people who have witnessed things.... Our society depends on the idea of future generations learning and progressing, and with the banning of books, all we are doing is going backwards, not forwards”

—Meghan, a teenage student from Glenbard West High School, in Illinois.¹

The public debate regarding problematic ideas and personal autonomy has cascaded into classrooms over the last two

years, as families and politicians demand more control over what our youth are learning. One approach to limiting

exposure to perceived harmful or controversial content has been to remove it completely.

Book bans are expected to hit a record high this year, according to the American Library Association (ALA), and while censoring books is not a new phenomenon, the current frenetic efforts to limit whose stories can be told and to whom reflect widespread cultural and political attacks on civil liberties.² Deborah Caldwell-Stone, ALA’s director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom, calls it “a moral panic ... to sanitize schools and libraries of ideas, opinions, [and] thoughts.”³

At the heart of the debate about what can be read in schools is the desire to “protect” students. In October of 2021, Matt Krause, a Republican state representative from Texas, sent a list of 850 books to the Texas Education Agency. Rep. Krause, claiming the books “might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex,” wanted to know if schools have these books on the shelves, and if they did, he wanted them removed.⁴

In this paper, we present the blueprint for a ninth-grade inquiry that focuses on book bans. Through a series of

questions, tasks, and sources, students first consider what makes books worth reading, then analyze arguments for banning particular kinds of books, and explore reasons why and how students are organizing to resist book bans.

What is “Appropriate” Content?

It is indicative of our current cultural moment that questions about what constitutes free speech, what is appropriate for students, and who gets to choose are front and center. Families, politicians, and teachers have strongly held beliefs and moral stances that they want instilled in the next generation. When there is a perceived threat to those values, even through a book on a library shelf, the concern is heightened.

Questioning what kind of content is appropriate is neither new nor specific to school libraries. In 1973, the Supreme Court determined in *Miller v. California* that community, rather than national standards, should be applied in cases questioning the obscenity of distributed material. Basing the decision on local interests demonstrates the varied regional perspectives over what is appropriate and what is not.⁵ In *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*, also in 1973, the Supreme Court directly addressed book bans in schools. When the school board identified books as “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Sem[i]tic, and just plain filthy” and ordered them removed from shelves, students sued, claiming a violation of their First Amendment rights. The Supreme Court ruled that

schools can ban books that are vulgar but cannot ban books for political reasons or to restrict access to ideas.⁶

The Role of Social Studies

As the debate continues in 2022, book bans are colliding with an already challenging time in social studies education. The current state we find ourselves in can be summed up in three documents: the C3 Framework, the 1619 Project, and the 1776 Report.⁷

The C3 Framework, with its emphasis on civic deliberation and taking informed action, places education for democracy at the center of social studies practice. Adopted in part or whole in 32 states and counting, the C3 Framework represents a national approach to teaching inquiry-based social studies.⁸ In combination with the Inquiry Design Model, such instruction privileges questions, tasks, and sources grounded in argumentation.⁹ Students are expected to investigate contemplative questions and engage in civic deliberation around authentic and meaningful issues. Ultimately, students are preparing to be engaged citizens who participate in their communities and take action to make society more just.

In 2019, the *New York Times Magazine* published the *1619 Project*, which centers the institution of slavery and racist ideologies as foundational to American history. Taken with the global protests against police brutality in the wake of the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020, the social studies discipline has had to reckon with its role in supporting and enabling unjust institutions and acts.

We are reminded that social studies must also ground itself in justice and aid in the work of holding America accountable to its principles.

However, just as social studies curriculum and instruction were expanding with inquiry-based standards and a stronger focus on justice-oriented curriculum, conversations about limiting what should be taught in classrooms took center stage. Manifesting first in the Trump administration’s *1776 Report* and expanding to proposed legislation in 41 states to limit what is taught in social studies classrooms, the public debate over whose history should be taught and how has spread.¹⁰ Classroom teachers are caught in the cultural crosswinds, left to navigate how to teach social studies in an increasingly contentious era.

An Inquiry

Below, we offer a route teachers might take to problematize book bans in their classrooms. This inquiry guides ninth-grade students through an examination of current censorship efforts via the unprecedented number of book bans in the past year. What we find particularly interesting about the calls to censor books at the secondary level is that those students are preparing for and already engaging in civic life. This time in their educational career should be about fostering their curiosity around civic and community issues and exercising their autonomy as citizens. Therefore, to highlight the juxtaposition between calls to limit students’ access to books at the educational moment in which their worldview should be

expanding, we framed our inquiry around the question, *Why should I care about book bans?*, which situates students within the issue and speaks to their agency as civic actors. The literary focus of this inquiry creates possibilities for meaningful interdisciplinary connections with English language arts teachers.

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To stage the compelling question, students will think about the role books play in their personal lives and will generate a class list of their favorite books. Next, students respond to the question, “Why are these books worth reading?” (see image above right). When considering the list of books, teachers and students may address any of the following questions:

- Do some of the books reflect who we are or who we hope to be?
- Do some of the books teach us something new?
- Do some of the books entertain or fascinate?

If students struggle to think of *why* a book is worth reading,



Image 2. An example of a class’s list of favorite books and why they are worth reading.

teachers may wish to show the results of a 2012 Pew Research survey that asked people to talk about why they like to read.¹¹ This staging task introduces the idea that books reflect aspects of ourselves and our values. In understanding how books contribute to and reflect identity, students will better understand why some groups ban books and why others resist such censorship.

Supporting Question 1

Building on the staging task, we next ask students to expand their thinking beyond why they think books are worth reading to consider why others think certain books should be removed from shelves. The first supporting question: “Why are books frequently banned?” guides them through this work. The sources and task encourage students to think through the presumed threats certain books pose. The first source (see Source A in the blueprint on page 374) is a set

of frequently banned books that include each book’s cover and a blurb about its central narrative. These come from the American Library Association’s list of top 10 banned books in 2021. The formative performance task has students sort the books into categories based on why they are banned. If students need extra support, teachers may provide categories, and ask students to match books to these based on sound reasoning. Examples of reasons for book bans include: Expressing Identity, Representing LGBTQIA lifestyles, and Speaking against Racism. Ultimately, students will be able to identify themes of why books are banned to understand the intended impact of book bans and the importance of fighting against them.

Supporting Question 2

Supporting Question 2 looks at the arguments politicians, families, and organizations are



Image 3. An example of how a student may sort frequently banned books by thematic category.

making for banning books. This supporting question addresses current efforts to ban books by asking students to identify the claims community members are making to support their efforts to ban certain titles. Social studies instructors may wish to collaborate with English teachers and have students analyze the strengths of the arguments of politicians, families, and organizations, and the rhetorical devices they use to make them. For this supporting question, students will look at an NPR article about the list of books State Rep. Matt Krause identified as, “mak[ing] students feel uneasy” (Source A for Supporting Question 2 in the blueprint); an article from *The Guardian* about a police department objecting to the narratives about police brutality featured in Angie Thomas’s book *The Hate U Give* (Source B); and an article from *The Hill* about proposed legislation in Oklahoma that would allow parents to challenge books in schools and issue fines if librarians do not remove

challenged books (Source C).

Supporting Question 3

The final supporting question brings high school students into the spotlight by focusing on ways teenagers have fought back against book bans. To answer this supporting question, students will complete an action/impact chart as a formative performance task using actions featured in the sources. For example, students might use Source A in the blueprint, the *Washington Post* article about students forming banned book clubs, to fill in the action/impact chart:

Action	Impact
In response to book bans, students created a book club where they read banned books and talk about them.	Students can read and learn from books that may not be available in their schools because of laws.

In addition to the *Washington Post* article, students will also look at an article about

students creating murals that feature banned books (Source B), and editorials students wrote in response to a *New York Times* article about the current rise in book bans (Source C).

Summative Performance Task

The Summative Performance Task asks students to construct an argument addressing the Compelling Question, *Why should I care about book bans?* In crafting their arguments, students will utilize the work they produced in the formative performance tasks. Students’ arguments can take many forms—posters, documentaries, or essays—so long as they include a central claim, supporting evidence, and clear and nuanced reasoning. Student claims will vary but may center on themes of exposure to new ideas, representation of diverse identities, and student autonomy, and might look like the following:

- I should care about book bans because I want to read books that teach me about people, places, and events that are different than myself.
- I should care about book bans because I want to read books that represent parts of who I am.
- I should care about book bans because I should have a say in the books I read.

Students may extend their arguments by turning their summative work into editorials inspired by the student responses in the *New York*

continued on page 375

9th Grade Censorship Inquiry

Why Should I Care About Book Bans?

C3 Framework	D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.
Staging the Question	Students generate a class list of their favorite books and respond to the question, <i>Why are these books worth reading?</i>

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
Why are books frequently banned?	What arguments are community members making for banning certain books?	How are students taking action in response to book bans?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Sort books into categories around why they are frequently banned.	Create a list of claims community members are making to ban certain books.	Fill in an action/impact chart assessing how students took action in response to book bans.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Source A: Frequently Banned Books source set https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10</p>	<p>Source A: <i>A Texas lawmaker is targeting 850 books that he says could make students feel uneasy</i>, NPR, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/10/28/1050013664/texas-lawmaker-matt-krause-launches-inquiry-into-850-books.</p> <p>Source B: <i>South Carolina police object to high-school reading list</i>, The Guardian, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/03/south-carolina-police-object-to-high-school-reading-list.</p> <p>Source C: <i>Oklahoma lawmaker introduces book-banning bill with \$10,000-a-day penalty</i>, The Hill, 2021. https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/587517-oklahoma-lawmaker-introduces-book-banning-bill/.</p>	<p>Source A: <i>Upset by book bans, teen starts forbidden book club in small Pa. town</i>, The Washington Post, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/05/11/banned-book-club-teen-diffenbaugh/.</p> <p>Source B: <i>During Banned Books Week, a school district wrestles with how to allow book challenges</i>, New Hampshire Bulletin, 2022. https://newhampshirebulletin.com/2022/09/23/during-banned-books-week-a-school-district-wrestles-with-how-to-allow-book-challenges/.</p> <p>Source C: <i>What Students Are Saying About Banning Books From School Libraries</i>, The New York Times, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/learning/students-book-bans.html.</p>

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT Construct an argument addressing the compelling question— <i>Why should I care about book bans?</i> —using evidence from the sources.
Extension	Turn your argument into an editorial and address the question, <i>What do we lose when we ban books?</i>
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND Collect the lists of books that are covered in your school's English classes.</p> <p>ASSESS Conduct an audit of the list and determine if the lists are missing books that should be included.</p> <p>ACT Write a letter to your future English teachers discussing the results of your audit.</p>

BOOK BANS *from page 373*

Times (in the Featured Sources for Supporting Question 3). To take informed action, students apply what they learned about book bans and conduct an audit of the book lists in the English courses offered at their school. After reviewing the book lists, students can determine if any important titles are left off and can make recommendations for books to include in the curriculum when they take the course.

Protecting Youth

There is a universal fierce and instinctual desire to “protect” the next generation. As we write this, we are in the aftermath of three recent mass shootings in the United States, including the one in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 elementary school children and two teachers were killed in their classroom.¹² Just four years ago, in 2018, 17 people were killed and another 17 injured at a mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.¹³ The world we live in is complicated and dangerous; families and educators are grieving and terrified; the demand to protect our youth is amplified beyond measure.

In her 2022 book, *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown talks

about the Buddhist concept of *near enemies* in which negative emotions masquerade as positive.¹⁴ Within education, we believe that censorship is the near enemy of protection. Through this inquiry, students learn that books are typically challenged by community members who find particular content to be offensive and harmful. Frequently offered reasoning is that reading offensive material will lead children to engage in offensive behavior.¹⁵ While the desire to protect is worthy, what happens when books are taken off shelves is that students lose the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussion around meaningful and perhaps confusing or complicated topics. They lose the chance to see themselves represented in characters and to learn about different ways of being.

Books are a doorway to understanding the human experience. Both past and present reading is a transactional process.¹⁶ Readers are not simply vessels who receive information from texts; rather they interpret texts based on their own positionalities and worldviews. Interactions with books help students understand themselves and the world

around them.¹⁷ Removing them from shelves has implications.

We understand that the content of this inquiry may not be welcome in all educational spaces. That said, there are ways to work within curricular confines. We encourage educators to seek like-minded colleagues to collaborate on planning and problem-solving. As always, know the local and national social studies standards well and be able to identify those in line with this inquiry. Communicate clearly with families about teaching objectives and highlight the inclusion of multiple perspectives. We believe our collective work as social studies educators, even within constrained contexts, will continue to promote a more just world.

This inquiry guides students to think critically about what book bans are, what they do, and how people respond to them. It encourages debate about problematic ideas versus personal autonomy. At the heart of this debate, we must ask ourselves, “Problematic ideas *for whom?* *Whose* autonomy is prioritized?” and importantly, “*Who decides?*” Engaging our youth in these kinds of discussions is at the center of a democratic education. ■

Notes

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