

Maine's Libraries Weather the War on Books

by Michelle Sampson

ABSTRACT

Public and school libraries provide many things to their communities. They hold programs and events, provide services and meeting spaces, and in the case of public libraries, often serve as community centers. Perhaps most importantly, libraries level the playing field by providing free and unencumbered access to resources and information, regardless of one's age, financial status, ability, level of education, or other characteristics. Within the last few years, however, the country has seen an enormous rise in attempts to hinder that access. Maine is by no means a battleground state in the war on books, but the state has not escaped attempts to censor. This article recaps recent challenges to books in Maine public and school libraries and places these actions within the greater context of challenges nationwide.

Libraries have often been described as the last true bastion of democracy. These venerable institutions level the field by ensuring every person who walks through the doors has free, unfettered access to information despite level of income or education, age or gender, religion or ethnicity, language or ability. Libraries provide materials and services that support critical thinking, idea development, public discourse, and that ultimately help create a fair and just society—all of which is set forth in the American Library Association's (ALA) "Library Bill of Rights" and "Freedom to Read Statement."¹

Schools and school libraries operate differently in a few ways. Resources and services are shaped largely by the school level (for example, elementary vs high school) and its curriculum. Access to materials and services are also often guided by the American Library Association's "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights."² Furthermore, as schools are considered to operate *in loco parentis*, access to those resources and services can in some instances be curtailed for students by their parents or guardians. Lastly, school libraries do not allow use by nonstudents or nonfaculty except under special circumstances. As an example, the Martha Sawyer Community Library in Lebanon, Maine, is both a public and an elementary school library.

Regardless of the type of library, professional librarians and school media specialists tasked with collection

development are guided by specialized training(s), collection development policies, and reviews in professional journals dedicated to this purpose. That said, there have always been people and groups who feel threatened by various ideas or subject matters.

Most recently, groups such as Moms for Liberty have formed with the shared goal of limiting what others might read or view; there is one chapter in the state of Maine. The group initially formed to protest mask and vaccine mandates in schools, but is now perhaps best known for organized campaigns to ban books on

subject matters such as LGBTQ+ rights, race, and sexuality. The Moms for Liberty website points to Book Looks website for book ratings, though the latter indicates there is no affiliation between the two.³

Book Looks claims to evaluate content within the context of the work as a whole, but passages, graphics, or illustrations are extracted and quoted with no mention or indication of how they relate to the entire work. Ratings are based on a scale of 1–5, 5 being a work with the highest amount of objectionable content. The end result is a pre-packaged curriculum of sorts with lists of titles and talking points, often shared on social media, that make it easy for citizens or groups to launch what are known as "challenges."

For example, Robie H. Harris and Michael Emberley's 20-year-old book *It's Perfectly Normal*, a book about puberty geared to middle schoolers, received a rating of 3 out of 5 and comes with an ominous looking black and red content box warning those under the age of 18 (for whom the content might be illegal to view) and for those who might be offended to "please exit now."

As Kerrie Lattari, Library Media Specialist at York Middle School, relayed (personal communication, August 22, 2024), in November 2021, a community member objected to the inclusion of Harris and Emberley's book in the middle school library. In the request for reconsideration, the resident indicated she had no children or grandchildren in the schools and "found out about this book from

Facebook.” According to Lattari, the woman “included a page of excerpts from the book that she took issue with and made it clear she believed the content was unsuitable for 10-year olds (we are a 5th–8th grade school).”

Under similar circumstances, earlier this year at Bethel’s Telstar Middle High School (grades 6–12), a resident with no children in the district’s schools filed an objection to the book *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews. The reason, wrote Librarian Kelley Fraser (personal communication, March 27, 2024), was, “10-year-olds should not be exposed to the language in the book. Since my library serves students grades 6–12, I’m covering 11–19-year-olds.... One of the complainant’s arguments was that any parent who wanted their child to read a book like *Me, Earl and the Dying Girl* could bring that student to the public library. This is a BIG argument that is just not true.” This title also received a rating of 3 on BookLook.org.

In 2023, the number challenges exploded more than 1000 percent with attempts to censor 4,240 unique titles.

Books commonly assigned for middle or high school classes, such as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, or Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, are still marked for removal (though to date, not in Maine), though they are joined by books read for pleasure—books such as Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants* or R.L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* series. Even the *Holy Bible*. As reported in the *Washington Post*, “today’s book bans might be more dangerous than those from the past” in that the most frequently targeted titles have shifted to those “children choose to read, not works they are assigned.... Last year, Texas state Rep. Matt Krause (R) made national news when he released a list of more than 800 books that he want[ed] to prohibit schools and libraries from carrying, inspiring conservative school districts across the nation to step up their own efforts” (Perrillo 2022).

Neither of the books identified in Maine’s challenges were assigned reading, but they were on the shelf in the school library. Following existing policies, in each

instance review committees were formed and both recommended retaining the titles. Appeals were made to the respective school boards and both ultimately voted to keep the books in their school library.

Lebanon’s Martha Sawyer Community Library, which serves as both an elementary school and public library, had a unique challenge. In 2021, Director Marcy Polletta applied for and won a Maine Public Library Fund grant, funded by a voluntary checkbox on annual state tax returns. Polletta’s grant request, “I Can See Me,” was used to purchase materials in support of LGBTQ+ youth in the towns in their district. MSCL’s budget for new books had remained \$2,500 since 2018, so during the FY25 budget cycle, Polletta requested an increase of \$500. The town budget committee voted to table Polletta’s budget request until she provided a list of the titles she purchased with the grant funds. Since they were not purchased with town monies she refused to identify the titles, though she specified all books appear in the library’s catalog. “They did vote 4-0-2 to pass the increase” Polletta said, “but in a not surprising turn of events, at the last committee meeting of the year before ballots were to be printed, they voted to zero out the line item for her substitute librarian (\$552),” thereby level funding the library. Thankfully, the board of selectmen chose to list a budget on the ballot both with and without the substitute pay so voters could decide for themselves; the vote passed to fully fund the library’s budget including the substitute’s pay” (personal communication, August 23, 2024).

In one final example illustrating a different tactic aimed to censor content, last year a Berwick Public Library patron came into the library and checked out nine books from a Pride Month display. According to Library Director Sharon Kelley, the patron then “proceeded to send a ‘Moms of Liberty’ letter to the library and the private home of each Library Board member stating that ‘to protect our children and the community, she had checked these books out and planned to keep them as long as it takes to keep them out of the hands of children.’” The woman returned several days later to find every single title back on display, new copies having been donated by people who heard the story (personal communication, August 23, 2024).

Challenges are certainly nothing new to libraries. In 2001, the American Library Association (ALA) began tracking their numbers. For 20 years, the number of censorship attempts in the United States never rose above 378 titles. In 2021, however, it jumped to 1,858 titles, an

increase of nearly 400 percent. In 2023, the number of challenges exploded more than 1000 percent with attempts to censor 4,240 unique titles. And these are only the challenges that were reported. Unlike Florida, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Texas, 4 of 17 states with over 100 titles on the chopping block last year, Maine is not a battleground state in the war on books.⁴ The number of objections to library materials across the state have been few by comparison, but their numbers have risen and mirror the trajectory of the country (Geduld 2023).

Per the Maine Library Association and ALA, the highest number of challenges tracked in Maine in any one year between 2014 and 2020 was three requests for reconsideration on three different titles. In 2021, that number increased by 250 percent to 11 challenges on 11 different titles. In 2023, the number of challenges in Maine spiked to 17, but this time more than 60 titles were targeted, an increase of 450 percent in the number of challenges. This trend in Maine also followed the national trend: a proliferation of “blanket challenges,” or libraries being asked to reconsider multiple titles at once (for example, all books on gender) and is an indicator of the effect of organized groups such as Moms for Liberty. Maine, however, diverged from the trend in censorship attempts: in 2023 on the national level, 54 percent of challenges took place in public libraries, while in Maine, all but 1 of the 17 challenges took place in school libraries.⁵ It’s significant to note all challenges in Maine resulted in books ultimately remaining on library shelves.

The myriad of challenges to—and legislation of—school curricula, books, and other materials have led, in part, to a proliferation of hotly contested school board races in states like Florida, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Texas, Minnesota, and Virginia (Schultz and Mulvihill 2023). Albeit on a much smaller scale, anecdotally, Maine, too, had higher rates of interest in running for seats on school boards. Describing Maine as a “microcosm” of what’s happening across the country, *Maine Morning Star’s* AnneMarie Hilton (2023) covered one such instance in the Windham-Raymond school district. The piece documents efforts during the 2022–2023 school year to have three titles removed from the middle and high schools: *Nick & Charlie, Identical*, and *Gender Queer*. The last title is the most frequently challenged title across the country. Ultimately, none of the books was removed from shelves, but the effort resulted in an uptick of candidates for 2024’s school board. Neither of the two candidates running, in part, to limit access won their races.

RESOURCES

- American Civil Liberties Union: Defending our right to learn. <https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/defending-our-right-to-learn>
- American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom: <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif>
- Comic Book Legal Defense Fund: <https://cblddf.org/>
- National Coalition Against Censorship: <https://ncac.org/>
- National Council of Teachers of English, Intellectual Freedom Center: <https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/>
- PEN America, book bans: <https://pen.org/book-bans/>

In *hotbed* states—those with multiple instances of censoring books or curricula and increases in candidates for school board races—it was perhaps unsurprising that one of the outcomes was a proliferation of legislation (drafted and/or enacted) on both sides of the issue.

Since 2021, when ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom began documenting the sharp increase in censorship attempts, PEN America, an international nonprofit that works to defend the freedom of expression in the written word, reported there have been more than “350 Educational Gag Orders (EGOs) introduced in state legislatures across the country.... Legislators who support these bills appear determined to use state power to exert ideological control over public educational institutions.”⁶ Some became law, though not in the state of Maine.

Every state has some version of an obscenity law on the books. Maine’s (Title 17, Chapter 93-A, Section 2911) includes an exemption for noncommercial materials used for purely educational purposes in any public or private educational institution (no matter the level) as well as any materials exhibited commercially in art galleries or museums. Any of these materials would need to be knowingly disseminated, exhibited, or offered to a minor, defined as anyone under the age of 18. The law defines a work obscene if, as a whole, they “lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value,” and “depict or describe, in a patently offensive manner, sexual acts, excretory functions, masturbation or lewd exhibition of the genitals.” The educational exemption is predicated on the premise

that educators create curricula and select materials of merit for said curricula; however, the exemption did not prevent attempts to change or do away with it.

In Maine in 2023 alone, two pieces of legislation would have made it a Class C crime for those found in violation; Class C crimes come with a maximum punishment of five years in prison and a \$5000 fine.⁷ State Representative Jeffrey Adams (R-Lebanon) introduced LD 618 (An Act to Eliminate Critical Race Theory, Social and Emotional Learning and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion from School Curricula), and Senator James Libby (R-Cumberland) introduced LD123 (An Act to Eliminate the Educational Purposes Exception to the Prohibition on the Dissemination of Obscene Matter to Minors). Neither bill passed.

Efforts to censor materials most often occur first on the local level before sometimes appearing in drafts of legislation written in language aimed not at any one title, but in the form of blanket challenges directed at entire swaths of viewpoints and voices most often underrepresented, such as the viewpoints of LGBTQ+, racial, or ethnic populations. When there are attempts to prevent access to materials or to legislate what others can and cannot read or view, we have a moral obligation to defend these materials and the rights of citizens to make their own decisions. Concerned citizens can provide testimony in front of school boards and state legislatures or write letters in support of intellectual freedom. As noted by York Middle School Library Media Specialist Kerrie Lattari, “the support of the York community as we faced this challenge was crucial in our fight for intellectual freedom.”

Censorship is the proverbial slippery slope. What one views as obscene may be an opportunity for discussion or a teachable moment to another. It may be the saving grace for someone who sees his/her/their story reflected back at them because we are not all alike and we need to see ourselves in stories. Ultimately, who has the right to tell another person what their tween or teen should or should not read?

In a York School Board meeting where *It’s Perfectly Normal* was being challenged, and with her mother at her side, one student said: “I’m in fifth grade, and I feel that I should have the right to read a book if I want to read a book, of course if it’s approved by my parents first. I definitely do not want a person I don’t know telling me what I can’t read. I also think kids should learn from these kinds of books, so that they’re prepared for the world.” (Fine 2021).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the help provided by Kerrie Lattari, library media specialist, York Middle School; Kelley Fraser, librarian, Telstar Middle School (Bethel); Sharon Kelley, library director, Berwick Public Library; and Marcy Polletta, librarian, Martha Sawyer Community Library (Lebanon).

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill> and <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>
- 2 <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/accessresources>
- 3 <https://www.momsforliberty.org/>; <https://booklooks.org/>
- 4 <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/book-ban-data>
- 5 <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers>
- 6 <https://pen.org/report/educational-gag-orders/>
- 7 https://www.maine.gov/ag/crime/criminal_justice_system.shtml

REFERENCES

- Fine, Camille. 2021. “Opponents of Sex Ed Book in York Middle School Library Were Expected. Here’s What Happened.” *Portsmouth Herald*, December 3. <https://www.seacoastonline.com/story/news/education/2021/12/03/effort-pull-its-perfectly-normal-me-school-library-opposed/8836661002/>.
- Geduld, Amanda. 2022. “Twenty-Two Challenges to School Library Books Have Been Filed in Maine since January 2022.” *Maine Monitor*, August 27. <https://themainemonitor.org/twenty-two-challenges-to-school-library-books-have-been-filed-in-maine-since-january-2022-just-one-book-has-been-removed>.
- Hilton, AnneMarie. 2023. “RSU14 School Board Race Mirrors National Trend of Limiting Book Access, ‘Parents Rights.’” *Maine Morning Star*, October 17. <https://mainemorningstar.com/2023/10/17/rsu14-school-board-race-mirrors-national-trend-of-limiting-book-access-parents-rights/>.
- Perrillo, Jonna. 2022. “Today’s Book Bans Might Be More Dangerous Than Those from the Past.” *Washington Post*, September 12. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2022/09/12/todays-book-bans-might-be-more-dangerous-than-those-past/>.
- Schultz, Brooke, and Geoff Mulvihill. 2023. “Liberal and Moderate Candidates Take Control of School Boards in Contentious Races across US.” *APNews*, November 8, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/school-board-elections-moms-liberty-progressives-1e439de49b0e8498537484fb031f66a6>.

Michelle Sampson has worked in public libraries for 25 years and currently serves as the executive director of the York Public Library.