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Banned Books Awareness

Mackenzie Robertson

Julianna Browning

Sophia Braun

Madison Putnam

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By: Mackenzie Robertson, Julianna Browning, Sophia Braun, and Madison Putnam

Banned Books Awareness

Introduction

The first week of October each year is known as Banned Books Week. It is a time to bring awareness to the impact of banned books and to look at what has changed since the year prior. The American Library Association has reported that 2,571 individual titles were challenged in the year 2022, which is a 38% increase in challenges from 2021. The largest group of challengers are parents, followed by patrons and political parties. The two most targeted locations for banning books are public and school libraries. In the United States, Texas was the state with the highest number of challenged titles for the year 2022. From January 1 to August 31 of 2023, the American Library Association has seen a 20% increase in challenges when compared to the same reporting period from 2022. The increase is also seen in the running total of challenged titles. From the initial reporting period, 3,923 titles have been challenged this year. In 2022, the total for the entire year was only 2,571 titles. Texas is still the state with the highest number of challenged books this year.

Question 1: What does it mean for a book to be banned?

In the United States, books are challenged first, and if successful, then they are banned. A book is challenged by an individual or group when they attempt to get a book removed from a public library or school curriculum. Sexual explicitness, offensive language, and unsuitability for a certain age group have been found to be the top three reasons for challenging a book. Banning a book does not preclude all access to the material, given the prevalence of the internet. Banning books does, however, restrict any access to the material for that particular location, which removes resources that some people would not have access to otherwise due to technological or financial constraints.

Question 2: How do banned books relate to politics?

Banned books can relate to politics in many ways. First, books may be banned or challenged due to arguments such as inaccurate portrayals of history, promotion of propaganda, or encouraging questionable morals. The current focus of many attempts to ban books centers on topics of LGBTQ issues and race/racism. Arguments against the banning of books include concerns that such efforts limit freedom of choice and the accessibility to representations of certain groups of people.

Book bans also relate to politics in the actual policies being made today. In 1982, [the Supreme Court ruled](#) that school boards cannot restrict the availability of books in school libraries simply because the members of such school boards disagree with the content or ideas in a book. The

case also states that “Although school boards have a vested interest in promoting respect for social, moral, and political community values, their discretionary power is secondary to the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment.” Despite this SCOTUS ruling, communities all over the United States are able to support policies that suppress access to books. Recently in Iowa, nearly 400 books were chosen for removal in a school district despite uncertainty as to whether the district even owned the books. As a result of protests to this action, the list was reduced to 65 books, including classics such as *The Kite Runner*, *Beloved*, and *The Color Purple*.

Question 3: What can we do to prevent books from being banned?

If you hear of a challenge to a book at your local library, contact the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). The goal of OIF is to educate librarians and the general public on the importance of intellectual freedom in libraries. OIF provides confidential support to those whose materials, programming, policies, or services are being challenged. The OIF challenge report form enables you to report the challenge and request assistance in handling the challenge. The OIF estimates that the organization is only aware of 3-18% of book challenges and therefore encourages concerned citizens to utilize this resource.

Additional ways to draw attention to banned books include increasing public awareness by participating in Banned Books Week, engaging with media regarding banned books, or perhaps writing a letter to a banned or challenged author. Other means include joining the Freedom to Read Foundation, which supports legal and financial defense of intellectual freedom. Students can get involved by organizing their own Banned Books Week program at their school, local library, or bookstore as well as writing letters to the editor, to the public library director or school principal in support of their freedom to read. Perhaps most of all, people need to read controversial topics and share them with others. Avoiding difficult conversations about divisive topics does not solve problems. Reasoned discourse and understanding, however, provides a path to mutual tolerance.

Conclusion

Banned books continue to be a rising issue among public libraries and schools. Even though a banned book can be accessed in other places, restricted access results in a smaller spread of the messages and ideas contained within each story. With the number of challenged titles increasing, it is important to stay updated on local censorship issues and to spread awareness about banned books to others.