

Please Don't Read: How Book Bans Suppress Voices of Color

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Book bans are not a novel concept—however, in recent years, calls for book bans have surged to [unprecedented levels](#). Within the last four years, an increasing number of states have introduced and passed [educational gag orders](#) which aim to restrict how teachers discuss both historical and current events while also banning certain books from the classroom. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of proposed educational gag orders across states [increased by 250%](#). Further, states proposed more than 300 bills to limit teachings of the “[history of race and gender](#)” in public schools from 2021 to 2023. As of November 2023, [lawmakers in 21 states enacted a total of 30 educational gag orders](#).

Hundreds, if not thousands, of books featuring characters of color and other books addressing concepts of race and racism have been [banned](#) from classrooms. From the nearly 6,000 instances of book banning between July 2021 and June 2023, “[37% of books dealt with characters of color or themes of race/racism](#).” These book bans include [renowned works by Black authors](#) such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *The Color Purple*.

Lawmakers and supporters of book bans push such bills by branding certain books as “[divisive topics](#)” in efforts to suppress them. This term nearly always refers to “[issues about race and identity](#).” In the same vein, proponents of book bans cite fears of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in support of their position. CRT is an academic concept which suggests that racism “[is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies](#).” There is *no evidence* that K-12 schools teach CRT across the United States. Rather,

this academic concept is [“typically taught in higher education institutions.”](#) Nonetheless, this does not prevent proponents of book bans from using CRT as a [catchall term](#) to restrict discussions of race in K-12 classrooms.

Bills containing educational gag orders raise several concerns. These bills have a [chilling effect on the availability of material that *might* be covered by a ban](#). Because certain language in these bills are vague, that allows for the potential of such legislation to be applied [“broadly and arbitrarily.”](#) Instances of this chilling effect are already having a detrimental impact on students’ education. In Texas, acting out of an abundance of caution, a school district ceased granting course credit to students participating in a [“renowned nationwide civil engagement program.”](#) In Florida, [a lesson plan on Rosa Parks](#) left out race because of confusion with the Florida law. Across districts, some teachers [preemptively remove books](#) out of fear of potential bans.

Educational gag orders impose a significant burden on teachers and public schools, forcing them to navigate overly broad laws while also striving to provide students with an [accurate education](#). Simply put, book bans [add stress](#) to teachers who already have limited resources. In the same year where proposed gag orders increased by 250%, teachers were also trying to navigate the [aftereffects of the Covid-19 pandemic](#). Implementing book bans requires numerous hours from teachers and administrators nationwide to review such books in a time with teacher shortages and where [“resources are already stretched thin.”](#)

Arguably, the most damning effect from these educational gag orders is the efforts to erase the voices and representation of people of color. One report found that [41% of banned books included protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are people of color and that 22% of banned books directly addressed race and racism](#). Already, people of color, such as Black and Latinx characters, are [underrepresented](#) in books. Even in young children’s books, erasure

occurs—for instance, popular children’s books have [consistently depicted characters with lighter skin colors](#), even in [instances](#) where the characters were not White.

Educational gag orders are problematic on many fronts and leave behind harmful consequences. Particularly through the erasure of voices of color, students fail to receive an [accurate education](#). If students are [“not taught accurate and inclusive facts in school,”](#) they may instead fall victim to false information or harmful narratives. Some proponents of banning books on race support doing so because these topics might make students feel [discomfort or guilt](#). However, prioritizing teaching factual history and promoting more equitable representation is more important when weighed against [potential discomfort](#).

Seeing diverse representation, including representation of yourself, matters. Especially for students, the representation of people who look like them is formative in affecting [“who they become, what they believe about themselves and also what they believe about others.”](#) By banning books about the lived experiences of people of color, feelings of [“exclusion and invisibility”](#) are heightened amongst marginalized individuals. Additionally, a lack of representation can [perpetuate the reinforcement of negative stereotypes](#).

On top of concerns to students’ education, these books bans raise worries of threats to free expression and First Amendment rights. As state entities, [public schools must comply with the First Amendment](#). While at school, students retain their constitutional right to free speech and similarly, the [“right to receive information and ideas.”](#) Nevertheless, legislators have found ways to [“bypass the First Amendment”](#) which endangers First Amendment rights. Organizations such as the ACLU challenge books bans, arguing that they are [acts of censorship](#) which encroach upon First Amendment rights.

Ultimately, educational gag orders—particularly book bans—pose a grave threat to education, stifling students’ ability to engage with diverse perspectives and deterring teachers from addressing important topics. Recent book bans hide behind the guise of buzzwords like CRT to censor history and downplay the complexities of race, both historically and today. Numerous organizations have [developed toolkits](#) to support initiatives opposing educational gag orders. Continued support for these efforts is vital for the future of American education.