

# Book bans: What they are and why they matter

By: Bailey Fischer

Book bans have been rapidly growing all across the United States, including here at home in Conroe ISD.

According to [PEN America's Index of School Book Bans](#), from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024 there were over ten thousand instances of school book bans. When compared to all Texas districts, Conroe ISD is in the top 4 districts with the most book bans, totaling 106 books banned in the 2023-2024 school year.

However, with the increase in book bans has come an increase in student opposition. This trend has presented itself in students showing up to board meetings, filing administrative complaints, and even sharing the way book bans have affected their lives. When it comes to her education, high school junior Katelynn Reed remarked, "They're banning more than just books. They're banning the teaching of our history."

Despite the impact of sweeping book bans, many still don't understand what they are and how they affect students and communities.

## **So, what is a book ban?**

The term "book ban" is [defined by PEN American](#) as any action taken against a book based on its content due to parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials. The result is a previously accessible book being either completely unavailable to students, or restricted in some manner. While different organizations use the term in different ways, generally any restriction of access to a book is considered a "book ban".

Books that are available in school libraries or classroom curriculum have already been deemed appropriate by school administration. Book bans override that decision.

The journey of a banned book starts with a challenge. Anyone can challenge students' access to literature by utilizing an informal or formal challenge. After the challenge is reviewed, there are different levels of restriction. Access to a book could be limited to students of a certain age, such as middle or highschoolers. Additionally, a book can be restricted from being kept and taught in classroom collections. In extreme circumstances, it can even be removed from both classrooms and libraries - making it completely inaccessible to students.

The formal review process proceeds as follows:

1. The complainant completes the [Request for Reconsideration of Instructional Resources](#) form provided by the District and submits it to [library@conroeisd.net](mailto:library@conroeisd.net)
2. District Library Coordinator appoints a reconsideration committee consisting of a non-voting committee moderator, a campus administrator, a District level professional staff member knowledgeable with the material, a campus administrator, and four parents of currently enrolled students.
3. All members receive a copy of the challenged title and review the material in its entirety. As soon as reasonably possible, the committee will meet and determine an outcome. The review process should take no more than 45 school days. However, the committee may take additional time, if necessary, to complete the review and submit their decision. Within ten school days of the reconsideration committee's meeting, the complainant will be notified of the committee's decision.
4. Library materials under formal review shall not be removed during the reconsideration process.
5. Library materials reviewed through formal reconsideration will not be reviewed again within one calendar year of the date of the reconsideration committee's decision.

However, the informal review process can be initiated by anything as small as an email. According to the [Conroe ISD website](#), when an informal complaint is sent in, "the appropriate librarian or administrator shall try to resolve the matter informally," instead of having the book go through the whole review process. These restrictions are harder to keep track of and understand.

The Conroe ISD website continues that there have been 17 books formally challenged, with 5 books being restricted from high school students in the library (books restricted from the library are classified as restricted *Library Resources*). The real concern comes from the 151 books informally challenged with 120 of those titles being removed (there is no clarification on level of restriction). Out of all 168 of these challenges, there are only 9 reports detailing the committee's decision to restrict or not restrict a book. Among these restricted books are *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Sold*, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* - books known for their educational and cultural value. Find a full list of restricted books [here](#).

The list of books banned in Conroe classrooms (these are classified as *Instructional Materials* and are different from books restricted from Conroe libraries) is not available on the Conroe website currently (likely due to technical error), but it is confirmed that these 19 books are banned from Conroe classrooms:

*Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut  
*My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult  
*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson  
*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison  
*Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

We Are the Ants by Shaun David Hutchison  
Where the Crawdad Sings by Delia Owens  
Beloved by Toni Morrison  
Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi  
Brave New World by Aldous Huxley  
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer  
Girl in Translation by Jean Kwok  
I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter by Erika Sanchez  
Salvage the Bones by Jasmine Ward  
Sold by Patricia McCormick  
The Color Purple by Alice Walker  
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas  
The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

### **What about regulation?**

One of the chief concerns by those who initiate book bans is that younger students shouldn't have unlimited access to books that may be too mature. This fails to take into consideration that books are already regulated by professionals, ensuring age-appropriate content exposure without the process of book banning.

A large part of a librarian's job is reviewing their book collection. Librarians are tasked with purchasing, indexing, organizing, and regulating books. Part of this responsibility is removing books that have become irrelevant, aren't checked out enough, or are deemed inappropriate. Librarians have a review process for instructional materials (those kept in teachers classrooms) and library materials. This process is in place to cycle out books as needed or as required within schools - even without parents challenging titles.

Many feel book ban's strengthen parents rights, protecting children from books that go outside their own morals. However, parents already have power over what their children check out of the library. This is because the library offers something called a "[Library Access Form](#)", which guardians can fill out to restrict their child from checking out any titles they deem inappropriate. This allows parents to have a way to keep their children from content they wish to restrict, while not cutting off access for other kids with different values and opinions. What is inappropriate for one family may be just fine for another, and Conroe ISD's Library Access Form allows the individualization of content that is necessary to keep individual freedom of choice intact.

Book bans do not stop children from reading graphic and inappropriate materials, the regular cycles of library policy do. Book bans do not offer parents more rights or children more protection, they only champion the opinions of a few and restrict access for all.

### **Why does it matter?**

“Banning books gives us silence when we need speech. It closes our ears when we need to listen. It makes us blind when we need sight.” —Stephen Chbosky

The reality of our world is a harsh one. Many students are living through prejudice, poverty, and violence each day. Books often provide a unique sense of representation and understanding between kids and the tragedies they suffer through. Experts in education and mental health have long emphasized the benefits of books that explore tragedy instead of ignoring it; they give kids a space to feel represented, build empathy, and help kids to understand the reality of the world. Books on war, the holocaust, sexual assault, racism, social reform and more are often filled with pain and even disturbing material. However, the ability to understand and learn about varying perspectives through these books is the only way to break the cycles of silence around such issues. By reading these books that are deemed “disturbing” or “inappropriate” by some, we acknowledge students who are struggling and build empathy in those who weren't aware before. But by banning these books, we only ignore the suffering real people are facing and foster an unempathetic, uncaring generation.

This is a reality that is felt by Sarah, a junior in high school, who shared her experience with Read Between the Lines and explained "I grew up in a family struggling with domestic violence, but I found comfort in stories that showed characters overcoming similar circumstances. Seeing books like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Where the Crawdads Sing* being banned for excessive violence is disappointing when so many high schoolers face this violence in their own life. The value of identifying with characters should not be taken away from those struggling the most."

If we truly want to foster students' success, we have to make sure that their experiences aren't labeled as too inappropriate to be acknowledged.

Books also foster representation for students who differ from the norm. [Studies show](#) that people of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals are more likely to feel isolated in their communities, face stigma, and develop mental health disorders. Yet, through representation in the media people can feel seen and heard, increasing self esteem and reducing inequality. Most books pulled off shelves by districts are “written by or about members of the LGBTQ+ community and people of color.” ([American Library Association](#)). Removing the lived experiences and histories of marginalized groups only increases feelings of exclusion and invisibility, ultimately increasing the risk of mental health issues. Restricting topics such as race and sexuality from school literature only intensifies the feelings of isolation among already vulnerable youth.

Restricting access to literature threatens freedom of expression and pushes conversations into unsafe spaces. Many book restrictions seem to fall under what is called viewpoint discrimination under the First Amendment. Viewpoint discrimination is defined as when a government entity treats speech differently based on the ideas or views it expresses. Under the *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia* ruling, The Supreme Court determined that viewpoint-based restrictions are an "egregious form of content discrimination." Many districts, including Conroe ISD, toe the line between banning books because they are “pervasively vulgar/educationally unsuitable” (the criteria established for books to be restricted under the

1982 Supreme Court case Board of Education v. Pico) and banning them because community members do not like the ideas or political perspectives in the book. Experts warn that refusing to allow students to explore these topics in safe spaces such as classrooms will only push kids to seek out answers to their questions in less supportive and educational spaces.

Through the process of banning books, districts undermine the very students they promise to uplift.

### **What is the community doing?**

In order to offset the effects of these growing book bans, a local campaign called Read Between the Lines has sprung up. Student ran and organized, Read Between the Lines hopes to fight Conroe book bans and specifically eliminate the informal review process. Simply by informing teens and adults alike about the reality of book banning, Read Between the Lines has gotten many people in the Conroe community passionate and ready to take action against book bans. As time goes on, they will continue to host more events (informational meetings, fundraisers, and more) and eventually work to speak in front of the school board to try and shut down the informal review process. Read Between the Lines also works to provide an empowering community for teens around Conroe to find their voice in social advocacy and politics. Check out their instagram (@Read.Between.the.Lines0) or their website <https://read-between-the-lines-campaign.square.site/> for more information and more articles!