

Behind the far-right book burning campaign in the US

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19 August 2022

Officials in Keller Independent School District (ISD), near Fort Worth, Texas, have directed school librarians and staff to temporarily remove books “challenged” this year. The list of 40 books includes the Bible and an illustrated adaptation of Anne Frank’s diary.

In a recent statement, the district stated, “Right now, Keller ISD’s administration is asking our campus staff and librarians to review books that were challenged last year to determine if they meet the requirements of the new policy.” The statement was made after an email on the ban to principals was obtained by the *Texas Tribune*.

An email was sent to district staff the day before schools reopened for the new school year calling for the removal of 40 titles from classrooms and library shelves until further review by the district. The email included an attached statement by Texas House of Representatives Chair Matt Krause from October 2021, announcing his plans to initiate an “inquiry” into the district on a 16-page list of books the legislature is calling to ban, centering on race, gender and homosexuality.

This right-wing reactionary act of censorship has followed a long list of other such instances in Texas where books have been banned in recent years, with headlines coming out almost on a weekly basis on the most recent bans. One such instance was on January 28 when the right-wing Prosper Citizen Group (PCG) demanded that Prosper Independent School District, north of Dallas, ban more than 80 titles from its libraries, with 30 of them officially banned by March of this year.

Many of the challenged books in Prosper centered around sexuality and gender. Among the titles are *The Music of What Happens*, a Young Adult book about gay males, and *The Magic Misfits*, a children’s book

series that includes a girl adopted by two dads.

Significantly, PCG is a political action committee originally established as one of the many far-right Republican-connected organizations, pretending to be “grassroots” groups formed by angry citizens, created to remove all mitigation measures against the spread of SARS-COV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The first posts on its website railed against masking policies.

Belying its supposed grassroots character, PCG’s campaign treasurer is James “Jim” Herblin, an accountant and Republican candidate for Texas House District 61. Herblin’s campaign site embraces the 2022 Texas Republican Party platform, which declared the Biden government illegitimate, affirming Trump’s big lie used to justify the January 6 coup.

Moms for Liberty is another far-right organization taking aim at public education. The organization with over 100,000 members across the US is one of the most outspoken conservative groups opposed to mask mandates, in addition to its right-wing censorship campaign to ban books used in classrooms or held in libraries, most recently in Florida.

Moms for Liberty also has ties with high-ranking Republican officials. Notably, the wife of Christian Ziegler, the Vice Chairman of the Florida Republican Party, is the co-director of the organization according to Media Matters. Ziegler, unsurprisingly, is an acolyte of fascistic Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, viewed as a potential Republican presidential candidate for 2024 and seeking to appeal to Trump’s fascist base.

Such right-wing groups have been given credibility by the Republicans and increasingly by Democrats and the trade unions. Notoriously, in September 2021, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten partnered with the far-right parents

group Open Schools USA as part of her AFT town hall of death, which called for the removal of mitigation measures in schools as part of a program of reopening schools no matter the cost in lives.

A study released earlier this year by PEN America, a non-profit which describes itself as “a literary and free expression advocacy organization,” shed light on the extent and character of the recent book bannings. The PEN study, which took place from July 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022, documented 1,145 unique book titles banned, across 86 school districts in 26 states, and affecting over 2 million students.

Texas leads all other states in the number of bans with 713 instances of censorship. Pennsylvania had 456 bans and Florida 204. Those three states combined account for the majority of the bans. Other states with bans included Oklahoma, Kansas, Indiana, Tennessee, Virginia, Missouri, Georgia, New York and Utah.

Most of the books banned center around race and gender as shown in the top six most banned, including *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, by Maia Kobabe; *All Boys Aren't Blue*, by George M. Johnson; *Lawn Boy*, by Jonathan Evison; *Out of Darkness*, by Ashley Hope Perez; *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison; and *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*, by Susan Kuklin.

In Texas, fascistic Governor Greg Abbott instructed state agencies to develop standards to ban books with “overtly sexual” content from schools. The Republican-dominated state legislation passed HB 3979 in 2021, banning Critical Race Theory, queer studies and other perspectives based on identity politics.

In March, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed HB 1467 into law by, which allows banning of library books and instructional material. This has predictably emboldened the book burners in Florida. DeSantis also signed the notorious “Don’t Say Gay” bill.

Former president Donald Trump has supported the banning of gender- and race-related books on numerous occasions as well.

The Democratic Party contributes to the toxic politico-ideological environment that made the bannings possible, above all through its promotion of identity politics and its fervent opposition to class politics that would unite working people across lines of race, gender and sexual orientation.

The SEP analyzed the reactionary and bankrupt

character of identity politics in a lecture delivered to the SEP summer school last year, “The ideological foundations of Critical Race Theory.”

As they have demonstrated in their refusal to demand the arrest and prosecution of Trump and his co-conspirators for the coup attempt of January 6, the Democrats are more afraid of a popular movement against the growth of fascism than of Trump’s attack on the Constitution, as it would threaten to get out of their control and threaten the interests of the financial oligarchy which the Democrats serve.



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