

Texas Governor Abbott signs law authorizing school library censorship

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Are you a librarian, teacher or parent in Texas? We want to hear your thoughts on the recent book bans. Please fill out the form at the bottom of this article.

In the latest of a series of anti-democratic attacks by Texas officials, on June 12 Republican Governor Greg Abbott signed into law a bill that bans public school libraries from purchasing books or other materials deemed to be “sexually explicit.” The law, hypocritically titled the READER Act, requires book vendors to assign ratings to books regarding the presence or depiction of sex.

Abbott has touted the bill as part of his right-wing campaign to bolster his so-called “Parental Bill of Rights,” a euphemism for a host of measures to undermine public schools and the democratic rights of educators and students.

Under the new law, materials rated as “sexually explicit” would be removed from school libraries. Any library material describing or portraying sexual behavior that is “patently offensive” and not part of the school curriculum would be given this rating. Books rated as “sexually relevant” to the curriculum would still require parental permission before students can access them from the library.

The law defines “patently offensive” as sexual content that contradicts “current community standards of decency.” Critics of the law have noted that the language is vague and subjective. Ultimately, this empowers far-right groups to wield increasing control over book access.

The law will create chaos for school librarians and book vendors alike, who will now have to comply with the new ratings system on the fly. The onus is on distributors to come up with ratings for the books they supply, and retroactively rate books they have previously sold.

Costs to purchase books will increase, as vendors may have to hire additional staff or outside contractors to assign ratings. Moreover, vendors may opt to stop distributing to Texas altogether.

The law will also cause delays in the book purchasing process. Mark Smith, the former Director of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, said, “The bill will greatly slow the acquisition of materials by school libraries, reducing their usefulness and currency again, creating a negative impact on students.”

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), the state agency that regulates schools and colleges, will have the authority to review book purchases and ratings, and will publish a list of vendors that do not comply with state requirements. School districts will be required to submit a compliance report to TEA every odd-numbered year, beginning in 2025.

Texas already leads the country in the number of books banned by school districts. According to the nonprofit PEN America, between July and December 2022, districts in Texas banned a total of 438 books, including such titles as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Moreover, Abbott and the fascistic Republican lawmakers in Texas have created conditions for the far-right to prosecute a witch-hunt against librarians and teachers.

In 2021, Abbott ordered the Texas Education Agency to investigate “any criminal activity in our public schools involving the availability of pornography.” According to the *Houston Chronicle*, the agency has investigated at least 20 school districts following complaints by far-right groups, during which librarians have been subjected to police interrogations.

The law was written by Republican legislator Jared Patterson of Frisco, who has drafted a host of

reactionary legislation in recent years, including a bill modeled after Florida's "Don't Say Gay Bill" outlawing the discussion of gender and sexual orientation in K-12 schools, and a bill to abolish the city of Austin (the state capital) and bring it under state control. In the Senate, the READER Act was sponsored by Angela Paxton, the wife of recently impeached fascistic state Attorney General Ken Paxton, a close ally of former president Donald Trump.

Accompanying the latest book bans, Abbott signed HB 1605, which allows parents to review and challenge instructional materials, another campaign slogan of his Parental Bill of Rights.

Significantly, Abbott and others have used "parents' rights" as a lever to further eviscerate funding of public schools. A Senate bill passed in April explicitly ties together the call for "parents' rights" and an expansive "Education Savings Account" program, to the tune of half a billion dollars, to divert students from public schools to private and charter schools.

Like districts across the US, Texas school districts are already faced with calamitous budget deficits and beginning to carry out brutal cuts to teachers and programs. Fort Bend has already reduced its budget by \$40 million since 2021. According to Deputy Superintendent Steve Bassett, if the district wants to provide a paltry 2 percent raise to its teachers next year, it will have to cut another \$23 million elsewhere. The Austin ISD faces a \$54 million budget deficit after proposing a 7 percent raise for teachers.

The increasing efforts to censor books and school curriculum is part of growing rampage across the US and is a component part of the capitalist class's turn toward authoritarianism. Faced with an intractable political, economic and social crisis, the ruling class is seeking to overthrow democratic rights in a desperate effort to suppress the growing leftward movement of the working class and young people.

This has taken particularly sharp expression in Texas. In 2021, now-impeached Attorney General Paxton filed suit against efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the US Supreme Court, the state of Texas has effectively banned all abortions. Abbott has spearheaded a fascistic campaign against immigrants at the Mexican border, including mobilizing the state police and the National Guard.

The ability of the far-right and the Republican Party to carry out such attacks is only possible on the basis of the collusion of the Democratic Party, which has consistently sought to cover up the dictatorial conspiracies of Trump and his henchmen, has collaborated with the Republicans to slash social spending, and depends upon the Republicans to funnel ever greater resources to the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Additionally, the teachers unions and librarian organizations have done nothing to mobilize educators or the broader working class to defend public education and democratic rights. The Texas Library Association (TLA), while voicing mild criticism and concern, has actually given tacit support to the bill. Ahead of its upcoming conference, TLA President Mary Woodward stated, "We can't just automatically be against everything... In working with elected officials, it's important to try and find things you can agree on in order to have productive conversations."

The defense of public education, including academic freedom, falls to educators themselves and requires that teachers, librarians and other school workers take control of their struggles by forming independent, democratically run rank-and-file committees. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is helping to build a network of such committees across the US and internationally, in order to link the struggles of educators everywhere in a common defense of public schools.



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