

Florida leads the US in the sharp rise in books banned in schools

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Last week, Florida's Department of Education released a list of over 700 books that are banned from school libraries in the K–12 public school system. These bans have been spearheaded over the last three years by the far-right group Moms for Liberty and the state's fascist governor, Ron DeSantis. They provide an indication of what the far right has in mind in terms of widespread censorship, including ultimately censorship of left-wing views, which will not be fought or blocked by the Democratic Party.

In 2023–24, Florida has banned 400 more books than last year, largely because of a 2023 state law, HB 1069, that prohibits the state's schools from holding books that depict “sexual conduct” or are “inappropriate for the grade level and age group for which the material is used.” The law allows small numbers of Christian fundamentalist and/or fascist parents to challenge the placement of books in school libraries.

The Florida Freedom to Read Project notes that the number may be much higher since the state “only requires that they report what each district considers an objection to material, and many of those objections were still ‘pending’ a final decision by the end of the 23/24 school year.”

Florida has chalked up 4,500 individual instances of book banning in its 71 school districts in the last three years, the most in the United States. Escambia County on the Alabama border has the highest number of book bans at some 1,600, followed by Orange County with 700 instances and Clay County with 400.

Among the books banned most often in Florida are works by Toni Morrison and Kurt Vonnegut and juvenile fiction such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. A graphic novel based on George Orwell's *1984* has also been banned.

Nationally, according to PEN America, book bans

increased about 200 percent last year, with Florida and Iowa leading the pack, followed by Texas. *Only Nineteen Minutes*, a novel about a school shooting by bestselling author Jodi Picoult, is the most banned book in the US and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, about a Christian-fascist dystopia in the US, is one of the most banned books in Florida. According to media reports, sales of the book have increased almost 7,000 percent since Trump's re-election.

This surge is significant as much of the American population tries to come to terms with the implications of Trump's return to the White House. The expulsion of immigrants, the continued slaughter in Palestine, war plans against China and Iran and the dismantling of public health infrastructure are all to be accompanied by censorship and the stultification of children, where anything resembling modern culture is suppressed.

The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a blueprint for dictatorship embraced by the far-right gangsters that Trump is preparing to install in Washington, has outlined several counter-reforms that will enforce Christian fundamentalist bigotry, a crusade against science and ultimately anti-socialist thought.

Project 2025 proposes to dismantle the Department of Education altogether, which has only existed for 44 years since it was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter. It proposes that federal funding for education be turned over to states, which will then support “school choice,” that is, private education with far fewer restrictions on what can be taught. What will be taught, Project 2025 indicates, is a slew of “family values,” that is, Christian fundamentalist nostrums and beliefs. As in the Florida counterrevolution, “parents' rights” are extolled, meaning the “rights” of the right kind of parents: the fascists and the religious bigots, no matter how small their number.

Project 2025 suggests that “pornography” be banned from schools, although the document never defines the

term, and it is hard to believe that anything used in American public school systems and selected by teachers and librarians can be meaningfully classified in that manner. Nevertheless, Project 2025 inveighs: “Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders.”

This would doubtless target any educator who gives a sophomore in his or her school a book about safe-sex practices. But given the Florida experiences, where books such as *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison can be banned for sexual content, it also means that under an elastic definition of pornography, a librarian could be arrested, convicted and registered for life as a sex offender for stocking Ellison’s works in any school library in the US.

Project 2025 calls for defunding the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and therefore National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System, which often feature programming on science, literature, history and music. While it is not specifically mentioned in the document, the National Endowment for the Arts, which has been a target of the far right since the Reagan Administration, would undoubtedly also come under attack, and with it the funding of museums, literary festivals, arts publications and artists themselves.

Project 2025 also calls for the enforcement of the reactionary Comstock Act of 1873 that prohibits the mailing of obscene material or contraceptives. While Project 2025 is seeking initially to stop the mailing of abortion pills, the law could also be used to prohibit books and magazines.

The revival of obscenity laws will be used by the far right to ban a wide range of literature, as book-banning in Florida, Iowa and Texas already show. One thinks of the banning of James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* in 1921, but also of the widespread censorship of antiwar and socialist materials—as well as the imprisonment and expulsion of socialist and immigrants—as the United States entered World War I in 1917 and in the period of working class upheaval after the war, especially the Red Scare of 1919.



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