



Parents Against School Censorship Advocacy Toolkit

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Introduction

Since 2021, dozens of states have introduced and passed classroom censorship bills that restrict students and teachers from discussing race, gender identity, and sexual orientation in public schools. In 2022, Mississippi enacted a law to prohibit teaching critical race theory in schools, even though critical race theory is not taught in K-12 schools. At the same time, politicians and school boards are trying to ban books—predominately literature by Black and LGBTQ+ authors—from public schools and libraries.

Imagine not being able to freely discuss Mississippi’s history of slavery, or not being able to access books from your public library such as “The Hate U Give” by Angie Thomas or George Johnson’s “All Boys Aren’t Blue.” These books speak to issues related to race, gender, and sexuality that impact our daily lives. Stifling free speech and banning access to books is exactly what state lawmakers across the country are trying to do.

All young people have a First Amendment right to learn, free from censorship or discrimination. The ACLU of Mississippi is committed to defending the right of all students to learn, and we need your help as parents and guardians.

We hope you will use the resources in this toolkit to help combat classroom censorship efforts in your child’s school and school districts. The ACLU of Mississippi is hoping to count on your support. There is no time to waste, so let’s get started and do our part to ensure that everyone has the right to learn.

Ideas for Organizing Your Community

Activate Your Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)

Parent-teacher associations (PTAs) are meant to give parents a voice and role in supporting their child's school. PTAs are important for making demands of a school not only because there is power in collective action, but also—as contributors to the school in the form of donations and volunteer hours—PTAs can have a lot of influence on school policy. Working within the PTA to make demands of your child's school is a great way to use existing infrastructure to exercise your voice as a parent.

Write and Submit a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor in newspapers and other news media are an important way to bring your message to a broader audience. Letters to the editor, or guest opinion pieces, are an especially powerful tool when they draw upon the author's experience. As students, parents, and community members who are grappling with issues of inclusive education and classroom censorship, your contribution is vital to the conversation. Check out our [editor guide](#), with useful information about structure, format, and talking points for your letter.

Designing Your Campaign

For more information on how to design an effective campaign, visit our [guide to designing your own advocacy campaign](#).

Petitions & Sign-On Letters

Many of the stakeholders who create policy affecting your local schools are elected officials, including schoolboard members, state legislators, and other state-level officials. Those who are not elected are often directly accountable to these elected officials. Petitions and sign-on letters are a powerful tool to get the attention of elected officials because they depend on your vote! Below find guidelines for creating your own petition and sign-on letters.

Step 1: Designing Your Petition

Creating Your Ask

Consider the difference between these two demands:

- We demand more diverse voices and perspectives represented in our classrooms.
- We call for more diverse authors and perspectives to be represented in our English classes. To increase perspectives, we demand that at least 50% of the books in the English curriculum are written by authors of color, women, and LGBTQ+ voices next year.

What is the difference between these demands?

While the first ask is generic, the second is specific and measurable using a SMARTIE framework, and allowing for specific goals that drive change.

SMARTIE Framework

Strategic - your goal is a smart use of resources and time

Measurable - you will know when you hit your goal

Ambitious - if your goal is successful, it would signal significant progress

Realistic - it is possible to accomplish your goal

Time-bound - your goal has a clear deadline

Inclusive - your goal brings those most impacted into processes in a way that shares power

Equitable - your goal seeks to address systemic injustice, inequity, or oppression

Selecting Your Target

You can select a target for the petition by answering one simple question: Who has the ability to make the change you want? Depending on the school or district, targets may include leadership, (such as principals), district-level staff (such as superintendents), or policy makers (school board members). If you are aiming to create larger, systemic change beyond your school district, then targets may even include legislators or members of your state board of education.

Organizing Tip: The more local your target is, the greater the likelihood that you will be able to apply meaningful pressure. Also, consider how responsive your target may be to a petition—a school board member running for re-election may be more persuadable than an unelected school official.

Determining Your Audience

One of the first things to consider is who you are looking to organize and the message you are trying to send. You may wish to limit the signers to people who live in a certain geographic area like your school or legislative district. Similarly, you may wish to deliver your petition's message from a certain constituency such as students, parents, voters, etc. Your primary consideration should be who your target(s) are and what your message will be. A petition can be particularly powerful, for example, if it's framed from the perspective of students and has exclusively student signers.

Step 2: Collecting Signatures

Depending on the audience you are trying to recruit to sign your petition, tabling, online outreach, and direct, in-person conversations are all great starting points for signature collections. It's likely that a petition is just one of multiple tactics you are deploying over the course of a campaign, so consider how you might include signature collection in other organizing efforts. Don't forget to ask those who are eager to sign to become more meaningfully involved in your campaign!

Step 3: Delivering Your Petition

Sharing Your Success with the Media

When you deliver your petition, it's important to keep audiences other than your target in mind—this can increase pressure on your target! Make sure to identify any local journalists that cover education (see Mississippi Today's statewide education coverage at www.mississippitoday.org/education/) to let them know what you've been working on. You can also alert local media by tweeting @ them, submitting a tip to the publication, or sending them an email directly.

Deliver In-Person, When Possible

Use your petition delivery as an opportunity to request a meeting with your target so you can deliver the petition in-person. This will give you an additional opportunity to state your objective, and to ask them to make a commitment. When preparing for the meeting, think about who else should attend with you to demonstrate the base of people who support your objective.

Petition Materials

Sample Petition

Dear *[Target]*:

We are a group of parents of students attending *[Mississippi High School]* aiming to increase principles of equity and diversity within our school. As a school board member, we know you play an important role in fostering a diverse and inclusive learning environment for all students. Inclusive educational practices have been shown to increase graduation rates, increase college preparedness, and decrease bias incidents in schools. While we recognize the steps the district has taken to increase diversity and belonging for all students, we believe the district can, and must, do more to provide a safe, supportive, and enriching environment for all students.

Specifically, before *[Date/School Year]*, we call on the district to:

1. Increase the diversity and perspectives presented in English curricula by ensuring that at least 50% of the books covered in English classes in grades 9-12 are written by authors from historically marginalized communities.
2. Increase efforts to hire and retain staff of color across subjects.
3. Mandate that all district staff complete an implicit bias training annually starting next year.

We recognize these steps as the beginning of a continuous process of fostering a learning environment that meets the needs of all students, and we strongly believe that taking these steps will constitute an important step for the district. We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss these points with you in-person at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely, *[Parents and Guardians]*

Sample Demands

For school districts working to undermine inclusive educational practices:

1. Publish a clear policy governing the removal of books and other materials from school libraries. Ensure that this policy allows for public comment regarding the removal or restriction of any school library materials.
2. Return any removed books to library shelves.
3. Disclose communications from groups looking to remove materials from libraries or classrooms—Who's behind this effort in your community?

For school districts with a stated commitment to expand Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, & Belonging (EDIB) principles:

1. Increase the diversity of authors represented in English coursework.
2. Increase the number of books by and about people of color and LGBTQ+ communities in our school library.
3. Offer specialized courses addressing, for example, Indigenous history or ethnic studies.
4. Increase commitment to recruiting and retaining staff of color.
5. Ensure that the focus of history curricula is grounded in studies pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality.

Attend Local School Board Meetings

School District Meetings

If you do not wish to become a member of the school board, as a public member you can still attend school board meetings and raise questions to board members. In the state of Mississippi local school boards are required to establish a regular meeting date. See Miss. Code Ann. § 37-6-11.

By practice, school boards meet monthly. However, school boards may also have special meetings at any time, upon the call of the president or a majority of the board members. All notices of meetings are subject to the Mississippi Open Meetings Act requirements, which require that all school board meetings are open to the public. See Miss. Code Ann. § 25-41-5.

Policy Example: “All Board meetings shall be open to any interested person; however, the Board reserves the right to discuss in an executive, closed session, any items of business which if discussed in public, might result in unwarranted embarrassment or unfair advantage to anyone. The Board may enter into executive session following the procedures established under recent court decisions. All meetings of the Board shall commence as open meetings.”

Biloxi Public School District Policy Manual, BILOXI SCH. (Jan. 19, 2016), <https://www.biloxischools.net/cms/lib/MS01910473/Centricity/Domain/423/SECT-B.pdf>

Public Comment

All school boards in the state of Mississippi allow opportunity for public comment. However, the procedure for public comment varies by school district. Refer to your local school board policy manual to learn specific provisions on public comment.

Policy Example: “An opportunity will be presented to the public for input on any issue. Procedures for public input will be addressed by the President of the Board of Trustees at their discretion. Individuals or groups desiring to bring a matter before the Board of Trustees, which shall request Board action, shall present a written request to the Superintendent of Education, with a copy for the president of the Board of Trustees, at least ten (10) school days in advance of the board meeting. The administration and/or the Board of Trustees request that copies of any statement or prepared questions or comments accompany the request to be heard at the Board meeting so that the Board will be fully apprised in advance regarding the matters(s) to be addressed.” *Biloxi Public School District Policy Manual*.

Board Meeting Agendas

Under Mississippi law, agendas of the meetings are only required to be furnished to the public by the time of the meeting. See Miss. Code Ann. § 25-41-5. However, some school district policy manuals allow for agendas to be requested in advance.

Policy Example: “News media representatives are welcome to attend all regular and special meetings of the Board of Trustees. If notified in advance, the Superintendent will provide copies of the agenda.” *Biloxi Public School District Policy Manual*.

Tips for Speaking at School Board Meetings

Public Comment

- Observe a board meeting to learn how the meeting is structured.
Note: Some Districts livestream, so there may be recordings of past meetings.
- Research your board—try an internet search for information and media related to each board member so you know your audience.
- Research the district policy on book weeding—sometimes found in a library media center procedure manual.
- If you are able, share a personal story to show that these numbers affect real people.
- Look on the Board’s website or call the main district office to learn the process for speaking at a meeting.
Note: It’s not typical for the Board to ask or answer questions during meeting.
- Find out how long you will have to speak—it can be anywhere from 1-5 minutes.

- Practice your remarks out loud with a timer to ensure that you stay within your time limit—there is nothing worse than getting cut off in the middle of your speech!
- Write down your remarks to ensure a polished presentation—see writing tips below.
- Prepare and print a one-page fact sheet that highlights the main data or arguments for each board member.
- Be confident, this is your school district, and you have every right to be heard!

Writing Tips for Your Remarks

- Write the way you imagine yourself speaking.
- Use powerful and clear language.
- If possible, connect your reasons for making this change to Board and district goals.

Sample Outline for Presentation/Testimony

Introduction	<p>Share your name and district affiliation: <i>"My name is ____, and I am a parent of __ grade student at _____ school"</i></p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/> <p>State your agenda: <i>"I'm here to advocate against the removal of LGBTQ+ books from our schools" or "I've come to talk to you about book censorship in our schools."</i></p>
Body	<p>Explain the negative impact book censorship has on students and schools exacerbates bullying, disproportionately ostracizes LGBTQ+ students, and limits access to diverse viewpoints.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/> <p>Discuss lack of other supports like policy or official guidelines to support transgender and nonbinary students, positive representations of LGBTQ+ people, history, or events in course curriculum, access to a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar student clubs, access to LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education course, etc.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/> <p>Point out that these results/impacts contradict district or board goals and equity policy—use specific language in district or board goals or equity policy to make your point.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/> <p>Finally, share information about why book censorship goes against the First Amendment. Then, point out the possibility of legal action or federal administrative review.</p>
Conclusion	<p>Share a story that helps bring your point home.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/> <p>Clearly state the action you are asking the board to take: <i>"Based on the evidence provided, I ask that you take immediate action to remove the ban on LGBTQ+ books in our schools."</i></p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/> <p>Thank the Board Chair and Board Members for the opportunity to speak: <i>"Thank you for letting me speak my truth and encourage the Board to act in accordance with the shared values of our community."</i></p>

Join Your Local School Board

The position of school board member has gained recognition as a community’s highest honor. Local school boards are necessary because they afford means for bringing together varying points of view when formulating school policy. School boards make possible the direct exercise of the people’s will regarding public education. School boards are expected to use the information at their disposal to make decisions in the best interest of the community. A member of a school board is a member of a policy-making board. As a school board member, you will be able to address the operation of the school district through a set of policy statements that include topics ranging from the legal status of the school district to advancing student achievement. A public school board member is a defender and supporter of public education. As a part of its duties to the community, the school board:

- Establishes a vision for the district;
- Ensures the mission of the organization—to properly educate children—is being accomplished;
- Selects the Chief Executive Officer or Superintendent; and
- Evaluates the job performance of the Superintendent.

School Board Meeting FAQs

Q: Are school board members elected or appointed?

A: In Mississippi, members of all County Districts, all Consolidated Districts, and two Countywide Special Municipal School Districts have school boards that are elected by the voters. Most members of Municipal Separate School Districts are appointed by the City Council or Board of Aldermen. Some Municipal Separate School Districts with territory outside of the city limits but within the Municipal School District have one or possibly two board members who are elected by voters who reside in the Municipal School District but outside of the city limits.

Q: Who votes for an elected school board member?

A: Qualified electors living in the district where the school board member is elected.

Q: When do I need to qualify to run for school board?

A: You should contact your local school district office for the election/appointment cycle and deadlines. Candidates of any School District Office file with the Mississippi Secretary of State. Check their website for qualifying deadlines at www.sos.ms.gov.

Q: When are elections for elected school board positions held?

A: Municipal Separate School Districts: In November, in the same manner as general state and county elections are held and for a five-year term. *See* Miss. Code § 37-7-215.

Special Municipal Separate School Districts: In two school districts, trustees are elected from supervisor's districts on the first Saturday in March for a five-year term. In two school districts, trustees are elected in the November general election for a six-year term. In one school district, trustees are appointed—three by the county supervisors and two by the city aldermen. *See* Miss. Code § 37-7-203.

Consolidated or Consolidated Line School District: The first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of each year for a five-year term. *See* Miss. Code Ann. § 37-7-223.

County School Districts: The November general election for a six-year term. *See* Miss. Code Ann. § 37-5-7.

Q: When are appointed school board members appointed?

A: On or before March 1, for staggered five-year terms.

Q: Do school board members get paid for their services?

A: School board members can receive a per diem in the amount of sixty-seven dollars (\$67.00) for no more than thirty-six (36) meetings of the school board during any one (1) fiscal year or, in their discretion, they may choose to receive as compensation for services an annual salary in the amount of two thousand four hundred dollars (\$2,400.00), which choice shall remain in force for all successive terms or periods of service of that member. School board members are not eligible to receive any state employee group insurance, retirement, or other fringe benefits. Most districts do cover travel expenses to required meetings and some conferences, but this may vary by district as determined in local policy.

Resources:

For more detailed information on joining your local school board visit the Mississippi School Board Association at <https://www.msbaonline.org/BoardMembers/BoardService/tabid/323/Default.aspx>.

You may also care to review their 2020 publication “So You Want to Be a School Board Member?” at https://www.msbaonline.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=z9_JDEBNOZQ%3D&tabid=323.

How to Analyze the Constitutionality of School Board Policies

Analyzing the constitutionality of school board policies is important to help strengthen and legitimize your arguments. Legal action may come about as a result of unconstitutional policies, however most school boards want to avoid legal action. Putting boards on notice of a legal violation can lead to a resolution of the violation without taking the matter to court. Notably, book censorship issues typically trigger a First Amendment violation.

Here are two ways you can analyze whether a school's library policy is unconstitutional:

1. **Automatic removal:** Where materials are removed when challenged by a parent or community member before a formal review has been held.
2. **Viewpoint discrimination:** This occurs when topics aren't being treated equally by the policy. For example: if a policy allows a ban on a young adult novel for “obscenity” due to a sex scene between characters who are gay but does not ban a young adult novel for “obscenity” due to a sex scene between characters who are straight, this will amount to viewpoint discrimination and a constitutional violation.

If you believe that any of your school’s policies are unconstitutional, National Coalition Against Censorship wants to help! Report censorship at <https://ncac.org/report-censorship>.

Direct Candidate Engagement

Direct candidate engagement happens when constituents and voters interact with a candidate or other public official in a way that draws attention to an issue, asks the target to commit to taking action, and gets the target to respond on the record. These interactions typically happen at a candidate’s town hall meeting, a meet-and-greet event, or other forums or interactions with the public.

Direct candidate engagement is important for a few reasons:

First, engagement alerts candidates to what their constituents care about, hopefully guiding their priorities once they’re elected. If a state legislator candidate is asked multiple times about how they will defend equitable and diverse curriculum, that issue will continue to be at the top of their mind. Second, engagement helps voters make educated decisions about who to vote for. If one school board candidate commits to voting against all book bans and another candidate does not commit, it’s easy to educate voters about which candidates align with their values. Third, direct candidate engagement holds public officials accountable once they are elected.

Here are some simple tips for direct candidate engagement:

1. **Maximize your chance of asking your question:** Arrive early to meetings to ensure you get a good spot— position yourselves throughout the venue to maximize the chances that you’ll be able to ask a question, appear engaged if the candidate is speaking before, and raise your hand quickly if the candidate is directly taking questions.
2. **Have your questions ready:** Impactful questions for candidates should be close ended or able to be answered with yes/no, short (60 seconds or less), and prepared and practiced ahead of time. Introduce yourself briefly, and start your question with “will you promise to,” “will you support,” or “will you oppose.”
3. **Ask, listen, and respond:** Be prepared if the candidate dodges the question and gives a “fuzzy” answer. If this happens, you can interject, politely but persistently, to pose your core yes/no question again.
4. **Make sure someone is recording:** Hold the camera steadily and horizontally. It’s important to make sure you have the candidate’s response on the record.

As the elected officials with the most day-to-day operation of schools, school board members play a critical role in centering principles of equity and inclusion in our schools. Recently, school board elections have become a flashpoint in the national debate surrounding how and what we teach in our schools. It is critical that the public understands candidates’ positions on key issues within our schools.

Six Questions to Ask Candidates for School Board

Below are sample questions that can be asked of school board candidates to ensure they support students’ right to read and learn in schools. After getting candidates on the record, it’s important to share this information with other voters so they can make an informed choice to support candidates who recognize the importance of culturally responsive education.

1. Do you believe that libraries play a fundamental role in introducing students to new, diverse, and sometimes challenging ideas and viewpoints?
2. Will you commit to ensuring your school district maintains and follows a written book removal procedure stating that any effort to remove materials from district libraries must undergo a public process and produce a written determination justifying the reason for removal?
3. Do you agree that any decision to remove materials from a school library should only be taken in extreme circumstances?
4. Do you commit to upholding the First Amendment rights of all students’ to receive information, and oppose any policy that limits important conversations about history, race, and gender in the classroom?
5. Do you commit to ensuring that the district curriculum includes age-appropriate reflection on the roles of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States?
6. Will you prioritize the hiring and retention of diverse district leadership and staff?

General Resources

Know Your Rights

- [Library Book Bans](#)

Blogs & Podcasts

- For All (Mississippi) Podcast: [The Truths and Myths of Critical Race Theory](#) (Nov. 2021)
- At Liberty (National) Podcast: [The Movement to Erase Black History and Culture](#) (Feb. 2022)
- At Liberty (National) Podcast: [Kimberle Crenshaw on Teaching the Truth About Race in America](#) (Aug. 2021)
- Blog: [How LGBTQ Voices are Being Erased in the Classroom](#) (June 2022)
- Blog: [10 Books Politicians Don't Want You to Read](#) (Apr. 2022)
- Blog: [Defending Our Right to Learn](#) (Mar. 2022)
- Blog: [Making Space for Black History in the Classroom](#) (Feb. 2022)
- Blog: [School is For Learning — Including About Race and Gender](#) (Nov. 2021)

Demand Action

Report Censorship

Reach out to the National Coalition Against Censorship if you believe that any of your school's policies or actions to limit access to school library books are unconstitutional. Report censorship at <https://ncac.org/report-censorship>.

Share Advocacy Letter

The ACLU of Mississippi sent letters to every public school district in Mississippi warning them of the dangers and repercussions of censorship in school libraries.

You may want to try advocating for your students by sharing our open letter. This letter is a PDF on ACLU of Mississippi letterhead that explains schools' legal obligations. Feel free to print the letter, give it to your principal or superintendent, ask them to reconsider their position, and tell them, "I found this on the ACLU of Mississippi's website!"

See the open letter here: https://www.aclu-ms.org/sites/default/files/field_documents/book_ban_letter.pdf