

# Your Guide to Combatting Classroom Censorship

Adopted from [“Right to Learn: Your Guide to Combatting Classroom Censorship”](#)

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## Introduction

Since 2021, dozens of states have moved to introduce and pass classroom censorship bills that restrict students and teachers from discussing race, gender, and sexual orientation in public schools. At the same time, politicians and school boards are making moves to ban books – predominately those by Black and LGBTQ authors – from public schools and libraries.

Imagine not being able to freely talk about our country’s history of slavery, or not being able to access books from your public library such as Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” or Maia Kobabe’s “Gender Queer” that speak to issues related to race, gender, and sexuality that impact our daily lives. This is exactly what state lawmakers across the country are trying to make happen.

All young people have a First Amendment right to learn free from censorship or discrimination. The ACLU is committed to defending all student’s right to learn, and we need your help.

We hope you will use the resources in this toolkit to help combat classroom censorship efforts in your own school/school districts. Our campaign is thrilled to count on your support! Now, there is no time to waste, so let’s get started and do our part to ensure that everyone has the right to learn.

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## Talking Points

We know that the politicization of concepts like critical race theory is the result of a relentless campaign led by opponents of inclusive education. Through an intentional effort to build a narrative through the media, political discourse, and online, an attempt is being made to scare parents, educators, and the public into believing that students should not have the opportunity to wrestle freely with our nation’s history. It is essential that when we talk about critical race theory, inclusive education, and culturally responsive education, we do so in a way that clearly lays out what’s at stake – and what the other side is actually seeking to accomplish.

Below are sample talking points developed by the ACLU and partners that aim to highlight the danger of efforts to ban books and censor robust classroom discussion. Feel free to use these talking points as you approach suggested actions throughout the toolkit, including writing letters to the editor, sign-on letters, and when attending school board meetings to advocate for the right to learn.

### *Sample talking points*

- All students have a right to read and learn free from censorship.
- All students have a First Amendment right to read and learn about the history and viewpoints of all communities – including their own identity – inside and outside of the classroom.
- Book bans and classroom censorship efforts work to effectively erase the history and lived experiences of women, people of color, and LGBTQ people and censor discussions around race, gender, and sexuality that impact people’s daily lives.
- The First Amendment protects the right to share ideas, including educators’ and students’ right to receive and exchange information and knowledge.
- Freedom of expression protects our right to read, learn, and share ideas free from viewpoint-based censorship.
- Book bans in school and public libraries – places that are central to our abilities to explore ideas, encounter new perspectives, and learn to think for ourselves – are misguided attempts to try to suppress that right.
- All young people deserve to be able to see themselves and the issues that impact them reflected in their classrooms and in the books they’re reading.
- All students benefit from having access to inclusive teaching where students can freely learn and talk about the history, viewpoints, and ideas of all communities in this country.
- Every student should have the right to receive an equitable education and have an open and honest dialogue about America’s history.

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## School Governance 101

Before we get into tactics you can employ in your advocacy, take a moment to think through the levels of government that are involved in making decisions and policy regarding education. Many of the tactics below can be adapted for any level of government, but always consider starting closest to home. What do the policy makers in your school district have the power to do? How can they act to promote diversity in the classroom?

Our public primary and secondary schools are governed through a complex web of federal, state, and local policy. Elected and unelected officials at all levels of government have an impact on what we're taught in school, by whom, and how – not to mention how it's all paid for. To further complicate the picture, the degree of control retained by school districts directly can vary dramatically between states subject to a state's constitution, laws, and regulations.

The below summary outlines, broadly, the role that different levels of our government play in determining education policy. For more information on the structure of school governance in your state, refer to your state education agency.

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### Federal Policy

Through the U.S. Department of Education, the federal government works to increase student achievement in four ways:

1. Establish policies related to federal education funding, distributes funds, and monitors use;
2. Collect data and oversee research on America's schools;
3. Identify major issues in education and bring national attention to them; and
4. Enforce federal laws prohibiting discrimination in programs that receive federal funding.

Source: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/what-we-do.html>

#### **Key Federal Decision Makers**

*Members of Congress:* Members of Congress have the authority to draft and pass national legislation, including laws aimed at combating classroom censorship efforts and supporting the right to learn. Congress also provides funding to the U.S. Department of Education, and uses this power to set federal priorities and programs impacting school districts across the country.

*Secretary / Department of Education:* The U.S. Department of Education is responsible for administering federal education programs established by Congress, including initiatives such as Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind. These programs can substantially impact the ways states and school districts administer their schools by setting requirements (for example around curricula and testing) schools need to follow to be eligible for federal funds.

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### State Policy

While the functions and responsibilities of state school boards vary by state, most are responsible for:

1. Funding public education at all levels;
2. Licensing or chartering private schools and public and private institutions of higher education;
3. Providing oversight to local school boards;
4. Setting broad policies for school-level curricula, texts, standards, and assessments;
5. Licensing school teachers and other educational personnel, and determining licensing requirements;
6. Overseeing educational services for persons living with disabilities and other special needs populations; and
7. Electing or appointing members of the governing boards of public higher education institutions and state boards of education.

#### **Key State Decision Makers**

*State Boards of Education:* Members of these boards are either directly elected, or else appointed by the governor of the state. State school boards often play an important role in the development of curricula standards

*Chief State Schools Officers:* Each state has a chief state schools officer. These officials may hold a variety of titles such as State Superintendent of Schools or Secretary of Education. These officials may be directly elected by voters, appointed by the state's school board, or appointed by the

governor. To learn more about how your state’s education officials are elected, refer to [this helpful guide published by the National Association of State School Boards.](#)

*State Legislators:* In some states, state legislators are tasked with confirming the governor’s appointments to the State Board of Education and/or the Chief State Education Officer. Legislators also often retain oversight authority over these departments and officials. Finally, legislators have the authority to pass legislation that can impact curricula, training of teachers and administrators, and school funding.

*Governors:* In many states governors appoint Chief State Education Officers and members of State Boards of Education. Additionally, governors play an important role in shaping a state’s education priorities and focus.

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## Local Policy

Local schools boards – in nearly all jurisdictions composed of directly elected members – have the most significant control of any level of government on the day-to-day operations of schools. There are more than 14,000 school boards across the country that shape the experiences of students each day. Additionally, district and building level staff (such as superintendents and principals) implement board policy and impact student learning and experience.

In most localities, school boards have broad authority to:

1. Set policy and oversee budgets;
2. Oversee the day-to-day operations of the schools within the district;
3. Make personnel decisions;
4. Set curricula within state guidelines; and
5. Oversee training and professional development for staff.

### **Key Local Decision Makers**

*School Board Members:* School boards members are the lowest level elected officials affecting decisions made about education. School boards may have more or less authority depending on the state but always play a critical role in overseeing the day-to-day operations of schools, and have a large impact on the district’s curriculum, teaching staff, and policies.

*District Level Staff:* District level staff (e.g., superintendents) are unelected and report to the school board. Different districts may hire different district staff to oversee school operations and make decisions. These may include positions responsible for teacher training, curriculum design, and equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB)

*Principals and Other Building Leadership:* Building level staff generally report to the superintendent of schools in the district. They impact school culture, are often responsible for handling student discipline, and often directly manage teaching staff.

**Department Chairs:** In many districts, department chairs are teachers in the department that have additional responsibility for helping teachers develop curricula, and assist in teacher training and development

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## Designing Your Campaign

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

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## Actions & Tactics

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### Petitions & Sign-On Letters

Many of the stakeholders who create policy affecting your local schools are elected officials (like school board members, state legislators, and other state-level officials). Those who are not directly elected are often directly accountable to elected officials. Petitions and sign-on letters are a powerful tool to get the attention of elected officials because they depend on your vote!

#### 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 percent 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 two? While the first ask is generic, the second is specific and measurable – it uses a SMARTIE framework, allowing for specific goals that drive change:

- 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're looking for? Depending on the school or district, targets may include building leadership (such as principals), district level staff (such as the superintendent), or school board members. If you're looking to drive larger, systemic changes beyond your school district, then targets may even include legislators or members of your state board of education.

*Pro Organizing Tip:* The more local your target is, the greater the likelihood that you'll 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, for example.

#### Determining Your Audience

One of the first things to consider is who you're looking to organize, and the message you're trying to send. You may wish to limit the signers to people who live in a certain geographic area (e.g., your school or legislative district). Similarly, you may wish to deliver your petition's message from a certain constituency (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're trying to recruit to sign your petition, tabling, online outreach, and direct face-to-face conversations are all great starting points for signature collections. It's likely that a petition is just one of multiple tactics you're 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 (there's usually at least one!) to let them know what you've been working on, and the ask that you're making of your target. You can 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**

[TARGET]:

We are a group of students attending Everytown 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, 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 by 2024.
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, but 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,  
[X]

*For school districts with a stated commitment to expand EDIB principles:*

1. Increase the diversity of authors represented in English coursework.
2. Increase the number of books by and about BIPOC 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 history curricula focus are grounded in critical studies pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality.

*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?)



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## Ideas for Organizing Your Community

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### Start a Student Group

Bring students together at your school! You can start a club to discuss how you can combat classroom censorship. Find allies in your educators, librarians, and administrators to support your work.

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### Join an Existing Group

In your state, region, or local community, there might be coalitions or organizations that have a pre-existing infrastructure. If they're already working on equity in education and curriculum, join them! If not, ask if they might be able to start working on this issue with you.

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### Create a Banned Book Club

Banned books clubs can spark important conversations about issues of classroom censorship and help students access important stories they might be missing. Not sure where to start? First, review our round-up of [10 Books Politicians Don't Want You to Read](#). Then, once you've selected a book, check out the [Banned Books Book Club fund](#) where you can request specific titles be sent to your club, or explore the [Brooklyn Public Library's free eCard program](#).

Here are sample discussion questions to guide your book club conversation:

- What did you think about the book?
- Many book bans currently happening across the country target books that discuss topics around race, gender, and sexuality. Were there any themes around race/gender/sexuality in this novel that resonated or stood out to you?
- Why do you think this book was banned?
- One of the most common reasons for banning a book is due to "age-appropriateness." What does this mean to you? Do you think this is a valid reason?
- Do you think this book should be banned from schools and public libraries? Why or why not?

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### Activate Your PTA

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 because – 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.

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### Write and Submit a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor 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 important to this conversation. [Check out our People Power letter to the editor guide](#), with useful information about structure, format and talking points for your letter.

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## 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 at "rope line" interactions with the public. [Here's an example of ACLU voters asking Elizabeth Warren about immigration reform during her 2020 campaign](#).

**Direct candidate engagement is important for a few reasons.** First, it alerts candidates to what their constituents care about, hopefully setting their priorities once they're elected. If a state legislator candidate is asked multiple times about how they'll defend equitable and diverse curriculum, that issue will continue to be at the top of their mind. Second, it 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. Finally, it 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 ensure you get a good spot, position yourselves throughout the venue to maximize the chances 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 question ready: Impactful questions for candidates should be close-ended (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 for 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 facing our schools. Below are sample questions that can be sent to school board candidates, or asked of them in person. 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.

**Here are some questions you may wish to include in a questionnaire to school board members to ensure they support our right to learn:**

1. Will you commit to ensuring that the district curriculum includes age-appropriate reflection on the roles of race, gender, and sexuality in America?
2. Will you commit to ensuring that any effort to remove materials from district libraries undergoes a public process with ample opportunity for public comment?
3. Will you prioritize the hiring and retention of diverse district leadership and staff?

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## Resources

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Know Your Rights

- [Library Book Bans](#)
- [ACLU-PA's Guidance on Student Walkouts](#)

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Blogs & Podcasts

- Blog: [How LGBTQ Voices are Being Erased in the Classroom](#) (June 2022)
- Blog: [10 Books Politicians Don't Want You to Read](#) (April 2022)
- Blog: [Defending Our Right to Learn](#) (March 2022)
- Blog: [Making Space for Black History in the Classroom](#) (Feb 2022)
- Blog: [School is For Learning – Including About Race and Gender](#) (Nov 2021)
- At Liberty Podcast: [The Movement to Erase Black History and Culture](#) (Feb 2022)
- At Liberty Podcast: [Kimberle Crenshaw on Teaching the Truth About Race in America](#) (August 2021)

