

Schools have become the latest culture war battleground. Are public libraries next?

By Bridger Beal-Cvetko

Deseret News

March 27, 2022 at 11:40 a.m.

<https://www.ksl.com/article/50375904/schools-have-become-the-latest-culture-war-battleground-are-public-libraries-next>

SALT LAKE CITY — From protests against mask mandates to how teachers address history and race, public schools have become a cultural battleground for political and ideological disputes in America.

Last fall, nine titles were removed from the libraries of four high schools in Utah's Canyons School District. School boards across the country have made similar decisions, removing books such as "To Kill a Mockingbird" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel about the holocaust, "Maus," from libraries and curriculum.

The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 330 incidents of book censorship last fall alone, a rate "not seen in decades," according to the National Coalition Against Censorship, and "books about LGBTQ people and race and racism" have been the primary targets.

Although exceedingly rare, some public libraries in Utah have also noticed an increase in book challenges — requests to have books pulled or moved to different sections in the library. Librarian Wanda Mae Huffaker is in charge of the Salt Lake County Library's committee that oversees reconsideration requests and was previously the chairwoman for Intellectual Freedom Roundtable.

The county library — which is the largest library system in the state — received 11 requests in 2021, a "huge uptick" from the previous maximum of around three to five annually, according to Huffaker.

Most of the books were challenged "for depictions of sex and/or the body," Huffaker said in an email, but many of the targeted books also feature LGBTQ characters, such as "Gender Queer," "Lawn Boy" and "Flamer." Two Pride displays were also challenged.

None of the materials were removed, although the book "Sex Is a Funny Word" was reclassified to the young adult section.

Are book bans a growing problem?

Huffaker thinks the increased attention around books in schools has contributed to the high number of challenges at public libraries, but points out that handling complaints is part of the job, and it's something librarians try to handle delicately and respectfully. After all, the First Amendment that guarantees freedom of speech also guarantees the right "to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

"If someone would like to come in and ask us to review a book ... I don't view that necessarily as a negative thing," Huffaker said, adding that she is willing to discuss the library's final decision with patrons and explain its policies and reasons for carrying certain material.

What's more concerning, she said, are the organized campaigns that try to "stir up" public outrage and opposition to certain subjects.

Activist groups like Utah Parents United have made a concerted effort to combat "sexually explicit" books in schools. Its website includes a video with instructions for searching for sexual content and links to a list of nearly 600 "potentially obscene books to review."

The list seems to have been compiled in part by searching for terms like "YA Sex Books" or "LGBTQ" on Goodreads and other databases. It also includes books on race and slavery, such as "Stamped," by best-selling author Ibram X. Kendi, and "Who Was Frederick Douglass?" a children's biography of the Black abolitionist. The only explanation claimed that both books possibly contained "critical race theory."

Utah Parents United recommends calling the police to report books, although school officials have urged otherwise.

"Please don't call police, they have a lot of serious issues that they're dealing with, and all they're going to do is simply refer you over to the district administrator," Granite School District's Ben Horsley told KUTV. Huffaker said this type of mobilization hasn't targeted public libraries, which haven't been as central in the recent culture wars. But there may be some crossover, because most of the books challenged in the Salt Lake Library system appeared on the "potentially obscene" list linked to the Utah Parents United website.

Sex or violence is regularly used as a "pretext" for challenging books, when the "common denominator" is often their focus on LGBTQ issues or race, said Jason Groth, deputy legal director for the ACLU of Utah.

Nudity, sexual language or violence are often cited in book challenges, "but if you actually read the books ... that's not necessarily the focus," he said. "And a lot of times, you see that criticisms or quotes are very decontextualized from the entire message of the book."

The Salt Lake City Public Library's Josh Hanagarne points out that obscenity is a difficult thing to define — borrowing Justice Potter Stewart's "I know it when I see it" explanation — and most libraries have items in their collections that would be objectionable to some.

"You can find horror novels in any library that just have the most wild things in them ... just the most monstrous examples of what people can do to other people," he said.

Books can't be removed from the shelves based on "viewpoint discrimination," Groth said, but when LGBTQ books are the only ones challenged for their sexual content, it can amount to a "heckler's veto," where one person has an outsized impact on what everyone else in the community can read.

"It's fine for you to choose what you want to read, it is not fine for you to choose what someone else can read," said Trish Hull, branch manager at the Kearns Library. "We have books to serve our entire community, not just one subset of it."

"If we're doing our jobs right, we should have pieces in our collection that will offend everyone," said Quinn Smith, director of marketing and communications for the Salt Lake City Public Library.

Hull said she is most concerned when teen books are challenged for their content, because teen authors are usually "very conscious of their role" in helping youth navigate issues of sex, pregnancy, suicide, domestic violence and drugs — topics some parents are reluctant to discuss.

"Those are important issues for kids to know and talk about and understand because they're happening out there in the world," Hull said. "I'm sorry, if you don't think it is, you need to be a little more aware of what's happening in the world."

She said that most teen literature resolves by giving readers solutions that can encourage them to get help or find resolutions for difficult situations in real life.

How often are books banned?

As uncommon as book challenges are, it's even more rare for a book to be pulled from a public library.

Libraries rely on popular best-seller lists and critical reviews to determine the literary value of everything they add to their collection, making it unlikely any title could actually be considered illegal obscenity.

Yet even when they are unsuccessful, book challenges can have a chilling effect. The Washington Post reported that some librarians are beginning to "self-censor" certain titles.

Challenges can also hurt already vulnerable populations, Groth said, by sending a message that "those are not OK topics," or that "there's something wrong with the book."

"I think creating this idea of otherness ... becomes very problematic when you see books that reflect who you are, or how you look, being removed or pulled from shelves. It's saying 'There's something wrong with the subject matter, there's something wrong with you as a result.' ... It not only creates a roadblock to access those viewpoints, but it also puts a stigma on who you are as an individual," he said.

"It's OK to believe different things as long as we treat each other civilly ... and understand everybody's coming from a different viewpoint and a different life experience. To judge somebody based on their life

experience and say they're wrong, you can't do that," Hull said. "You can't tell somebody that their life experience was wrong."

Groth said that opposition to certain topics or books has "bubbled up" time and time again — often targeting the hot-button political and social issues of the time — before eventually fading away. He doesn't see that happening anytime soon, though, thanks to the high level of organization happening online and across the country.

Hull compared it to a pendulum, saying she hopes it will swing back to the middle, so "we can talk to each other and discuss differences and not feel like we need to ban each other." She said she is saddened and surprised to see book challenges gain so much traction recently, adding that books are meant to build unity, not division.

"I've yet to read a book, or have someone read a book about people they don't know or a situation they don't understand and not feel empathy or compassion," she said.