Teaching in the Crosshairs

Navigating Censorship and Self-Censorship in Secondary ELA Classrooms

Amy Lilek, Joliet West High School
October 24, 2025

Why This Matters

The Big Picture on Censorship

PEN America recorded **6,870 instances** of book bans across **23 states** and **87 public school districts** during the 2024-2025 school year.

A new twist: the federal government is using rhetoric about "**parents' rights**" to justify and advance bans and censorship.

Teachers are facing a struggle to **balance** critical thinking, intellectual freedom, and diverse perspectives with **external pressures**

Methodology/Research Context

In the fall of 2023, I conducted research or my Master's degree capstone paper

- Quantitative survey and Qualitative data

Focus on:

- Personal experiences with objections, challenges, or outright removal of materials/texts
- Significance of incorporating diverse texts in their classroom/curriculum
- Engagement with self-censorship
- Level of support and preparedness (or lack thereof) from their institutions

What's Being Censored– And Why

2,452 unique titles targeted for censorship in 2024. Up from an average of 273 unique titles from 2001-2020.

What's Targeted Most?

- Young Adult literature; LGBTQ+ books depicting same-sex and trans characters, content, or themes; books with characters of color or content addressing race/racism, sexual content/themes, violence, offensive language, "objectionable content"

Shift toward a well-organized movement to not only restrict but remove access

Prior to 2020, the large majority of book challenges were from a single parent/individual

Increase in state and national legislation: 110 “educational gag orders” and 48 bills directly targeting and restricting material in K-12 public schools

The Invisible Threat: Teacher Self-Censorship

Preemptive censorship that occurs “in anticipation of a challenge that has not yet happened”

Form of “**obeying in advance**” – the fear and threat of restriction or confrontation, the desire to avoid controversy, leads to a decision to avoid texts that may pose potential problems

The Invisible Threat: Teacher Self-Censorship

90% of respondents ranked the use of **culturally diverse texts** in their classroom as **extremely important**

70% of respondents admitted to **engaging in self-censorship**

60% admitted to an **increased likelihood** of self-censorship

Why Teachers Self-Censor

- **External Pressure**: legislation, parental objection, etc.
- **Internalized Fear:** “it’s not worth the fight”
- **Institutional Uncertainty**: Will I be supported by my admin, school, district? What are our policies?

Impact/Consequences

Censorship leaves students “with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values, and problems of their culture.”

Loss of representation and critical dialogue from diverse texts

Teachers must navigate a more delicate than ever balance between educational freedom and inclusion of diverse literature in their classrooms, and contending with limitations and outside scrutiny

What We Can Do

Individual Teacher Action

- Ask about and know your district's policies and your rights
- Build collaboration and trust with colleagues and in your department
- Document instructional rationale for texts
- Be transparent and proactive with communication home

Institutional Support

- Advocate for clear communication and transparency from administrators
- Push for PD on inclusive pedagogy and responding to challenges
- Encourage teacher networks or union guidance

What We Can Do

Community-Level Engagement

- Involve students in discussion about why books matter and what censorship/book bans mean
    - Amplify student voices
- Host “Banned Book Week” events
- Frame literature as civic learning, not controversy

Resources for Teachers

- National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE)’s Intellectual Freedom Center
- American Library Association (ALA)’s Office for Intellectual Freedom
- Unite Against Book Ban’s Action Toolkit
- National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)’s resources on responding to book challenges
- PEN America’s Book Ban Resources

Scan Me

Q&A

What strategies have you used to navigate or resist self-censorship?

How do we sustain courage and community when the pressure builds?

Thank You!