Book Banning and Censorship Campaigns

The national frenzy of book banning and censorship is plaguing the functions and reputations of Tennessee’s public libraries and public school libraries, making international news and going viral for the public comments. Censorship campaigns are popping up in small towns, rural, urban, and metro areas across Tennessee. Book bans fall in four categories, as defined by PEN America: banned in libraries and classrooms; banned in libraries; banned in classrooms; and banned pending investigation. Across Tennessee, censorship efforts now take up space and time during nearly every meeting for city and county government, school and library boards, and other public meetings. A Collierville City Schools librarian pulled 300 books from shelves to review them for sexual content with five categories for just how gay the books were and if they were about Black Lives Matter, before legislation on LGBTQ+ content had even been voted on. Sumner County Schools debated a book removal request by a parent who said it was about critical race theory, but it was not. After the Williamson County School Board voted to retain a handful of challenged books, an angry group of parents legally represented by Tennessee State Representative Gino Bulso, sued the schools. Public libraries aren’t safe either. Anderson County libraries received book challenges from a county commissioner. Rutherford County and Murfreesboro, its city center, have been involved with book bans and the consequences of homophobic ordinances and their midnight repeal.

The vicious fight against intellectual freedom has become a feature, not a bug, of extremists’ manufactured culture wars. This is also rooted in recently enacted state legislation restricting access to books and curricular materials, prohibiting “concepts” like sex and race, and propped up by parent groups and well funded censorship campaigns. Although voters overwhelmingly oppose book bans and nearly 2/3 of parents think that “banning books is a waste of time,” officials continue to promote censorship, becoming a major topical issue in partisan school board elections. In response, advocacy has swelled with passionate librarians, staff, teachers, members of professional associations, like the Tennessee Library Association and the Tennessee Education Association, parents, youth, and elected officials. They are showing up in force for public libraries, public schools, librarians, and fighting to protect the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and Article I, Section 19 of the Tennessee State Constitution. Public officials are reshaping policies, procedures, library board functions, and librarians are facing threats to their safety.

Libraries

Publicly funded libraries have been radical since their formation, with the first tax support public library established in New Hampshire, 1833. Libraries have evolved from every major historical period and movement through civil rights, segregation, and inequality. For the public benefit of local communities, especially rural areas, they serve countless functions and build literacy for children everywhere. Strong libraries are prized in communities: adapting, growing and representing the American ideal of free access to information. They should be accessible to people regardless of economic background and provide more than just access to books but also access to the internet, tools, classes, and community. Public libraries and schools were established to increase access to learning

and spreading knowledge, reaching into the smallest, furthest, and most vulnerable communities. Approximately 90 percent of traditional public schools and 52 percent of publicly funded charter schools housed a library media center in the 2020-2021 school year. Public libraries fill the gaps for young readers who don’t have access to school libraries.

**Young Readers Lose Out**

Book bans and restrictions do not protect youth or enhance education. Minority identifying students and students in under-served communities deserve access to anti-discrimination policies, inclusive books and curricular materials that reflect their intersecting identities. When they do, their overall academic performance improves and they report feeling safe and seen. Book challenges most likely to succeed include LGBTQ+ content, themes on race and social issues are second most common, then third is content with both race and LGBTQ+ themes. These bans are heavily influenced by legislation targeting school books and curricular materials related to race, sexuality, and gender. Building on different iterations of related bills since 2021. Tennessee leads the nation with legislation that limits public and private K-12 LGBTQ+ students’ access to books and materials in libraries and classrooms, clubs and athletics, bathrooms, pronouns, and healthcare. Nearly all of these laws have unintended consequences that also impact people outside of the LGBTQ+ community, like public libraries and librarians. These laws have created insurmountable obstacles for teacher instruction on “divisive topics” like racism, slavery, Black history, sexuality, gender identity, multicultural topics and current events.

In a survey of Tennessee public librarians in 2023, ~35% reported increases in formal and informal book challenges since 2021. The vast majority (80%) reported feeling supported by leadership. But an alarming number reported feeling physically unsafe in the workplace or insecure in their position because of book challenges. These librarians reported the top challenged books in 2023, 7 of 9 contained LGBTQ+ themes, topics, or characters.3

- *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe
- *Flamer* by Mike Curato
- *Making a Baby* by Rachel Greener
- *Cuando Amamos Cantamos* by Ernesto Javier Martinez
- *RuPaul* by Maria Vegara
- *Ciel* by Sophie Labelle
- *It Feels Good To Be Yourself* by Theresa Thorn
- *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* by Art Speigelman
- *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews

---

“Most people I have encountered expressing distaste for our collected materials can be talked down from their position. They approach angry that a book is being kept in our collection, but when reasoned with they will agree that they suppose libraries can’t take any one position or only stock books they want. However, these same tactics do not work when it comes to displays. They can be convinced that a book ought to be allowed in the library, but cannot be persuaded that we ought to be allowed to make it easily visible to passersby.” Anonymous Librarian response, TNLA Book Challenges Survey, 2023.

**Why this Report?**

Supporting grassroots advocates across the state is a core mission of the Tennessee Equality Project. With a 20-year legacy of towing the line between organizing and LGBTQ+ advocacy in Tennessee, we know there is no one-size-fits-all approach to working with local government. Book banning attempts are not expressly limited to LGBTQ+ themes or characters, but these are the books most likely to be banned and restricted in Tennessee’s public schools and libraries. This reflects another way society marginalizes people in all their intersecting identities. And censorship is a significant threat to Tennessee’s rural youth, where 93% of all 95 counties are rural. As the legislative hostility towards LGBTQ+ children and youth has increased in state government, the queer community and equality advocates knew it was only a matter of time before these same threats would pop up in municipal governments, small communities, and rural counties.

Library advocates are countering these censorship campaigns and showing up in defense of Free Speech, libraries, and the value of diverse materials in libraries. Professional librarians have access to advocacy resources and support from professional networks and organizations like the Tennessee Library Association, Tennessee School Library Association, Tennessee Education Association, and the American Library Association. Many of them have graduate level credentials in library science, like the Master of Library and Information Sciences degree. They have a strong foundation in the unique purpose of the First Amendment and the historical importance of fighting to protect these rights in the United States. Yet the vast majority of the library advocates are new to advocacy and have widely different backgrounds. They are community members, students and young people, parents advocating on behalf of LGBTQ+ students, teachers, clergy, and government officials.

To support library advocates across the state, this report is a toolkit for new advocates confronting censorship campaigns in small and large counties. It summarizes the experiences, perspectives, lessons learned and the support needed in advocacy from free speech champions in Anderson, Maury, McMinn, Rutherford, and Wilson Counties. Themes, resources, and links are included throughout the report.
Findings

Case Studies: Anderson, Maury, McMinn, Rutherford, and Wilson Counties

Information in print and digital media from national, state, and local news found in government websites containing meeting agendas, minutes, and archived videos of public meetings were used to understand the local book ban and censorship campaigns happening across Tennessee.

After reviewing many hours of videos with public comments and official proceedings, several themes stood out. Censorship proponents are dominated by anger, misinformation, stigmatizing language about LGBTQ+ people, and the reading of or reference to Christian scripture. Their argument is universal across the state: to “protect the children” from what they claim is sexually explicit material, indoctrination into non-existent LGBTQ+ agendas and gender identity “contagion,” and the immoral affront to Christianity. These campaigns are cookie cutter arguments, many are a template of a much larger campaign against public schools and public libraries. This report does not credit the organizations and bad actors who are backing these campaigns. It is well known who is propping up these efforts — organizations cloaked as grassroots with hateful rhetoric, funding, and coaching. They are also actively recruiting candidates who would commit their position to usurp local control to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion in public education and libraries. Frequent references to the Age Appropriate Materials Act of 2022 and the 14 concepts about race and sex in the “Divisive Concepts” provisions in Public Chapter 744 prohibited in K-12 education are made by officials. Although the targets are both “race” and “sex,” the vast majority of the titles under protest are LGBTQ+ themed books, including books with LGBTQ+ people of color. Graphic novels are widely misunderstood by adults believing they are simply “graphic” or dirty, in or out of context. LGBTQ+ themed graphic novels and illustrated books are particularly susceptible to attack.


McMinn County created a Tennessee tale of international infamy after banning a biographical memoir about the Holocaust, *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, by Art Spiegelman from the 8th grade English Language curriculum. Other themes that stood out from the pro-censorship crowd included a general under appreciation for the purpose of the First Amendment to the US Constitution and its application in public schools and libraries. Government officials appear to lack a comprehensive understanding about their own procedures and legal requirements in the Tennessee’s “Sunshine Laws,” Open Meetings and Open Records Acts, that govern their structure and function. Violations have led to multiple complaints. Alarming findings of harassment and threats about a community advocate were found in a Public Records Request in Maury County. Officials have made consequential changes for public input by amending their policies and procedures for public comments. Following a new state law for public meetings, counties seized the opportunity to limit the number of speakers, length of time to speak, and how they are required for signing up to speak. Public posting of minutes and recordings are inconsistent and the content of the minutes ranges from detailed to abysmal. Rutherford County Library Board summarized the speakers during the public comment period as “Library.” Officials are disregarding book retention recommendations from library review committees and librarians, creating age-graduated library card systems, restricting all ages LGBTQ+ books to behind the counter shelving, and restructuring committees and boards. Library Directors are harassed, doxxed, threatened, and resigning. The language, themes, and missteps are shared by both members of the community and government officials campaigning to violate the First Amendment and pushing for censorship and book banning. Minimal legal interference is taking place on behalf of public libraries, advocates, librarians, students, or the First Amendment.

**Interviews: Profiles in Advocacy**

Phone, virtual, and in-person interviews provided information in four primary areas within local advocacy: background information gathering and organizing, what is working, lessons learned, and the support needed to be more effective advocates.

Advocates from Anderson, Maury, McMinn, Rutherford, and Wilson Counties are closely familiar with the issues personally and professionally. They have in-depth knowledge of local governance in their communities. They serve in significant roles to challenge the book banning campaigns in their counties and communities.

First, we asked about advocates’ motivation, expertise, experience with local government structure and function, and their depth of knowledge around the issues. We also wanted to know about their grassroots strategies to increase people’s power to spread the word and sustain the work. They discussed their efforts to increase the numbers and confidence of advocates. They also told us about local efforts to recruit and encourage candidates to run local offices who would support public libraries, public schools, and the free and open access to information in their community.

The unique nature of each community was a highlight in conversations. But the common thread is the same: advocates are responding to pro-censorship, anti-First Amendment, and book banning campaigns while demanding protections for access to information. Small communities face unique challenges and advocates swiftly respond in kind. However, rural areas lack their own strong local media market and coverage of censorship campaigns is limited, making information sharing difficult. Some, like McMinn County, only received local attention after going viral. Collectively, advocates are unapologetic in their support of the rights of all people for the free and fair access to information, as guaranteed in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and the Tennessee State Constitution. Advocates have background knowledge of government processes and strategic thinking. They are highly knowledgeable of censorship campaigns and their origins, plus the squeeze of federal and state politics’ undeniable influence. Most advocates have been involved with their local Democratic Party with a solid grasp on how politics plays an outsized role in the local censorship campaigns. Every advocate discussed feeling physically unsafe as a public facing library advocate. They could name library directors, board members, and other organizers who had been harassed, threatened, doxxed, forced to quit their job, leave the profession, or move. These real threats have not deterred them from continuing to serve as advocates in the public eye. Advocates heavily rely on social media for organizing and typically start out as a small core group, growing into a larger effort. Those who remain isolated know that the threat of burnout looms large.

Differences among the advocates’ strategies exist because of their varied backgrounds, community size and the origins of the censorship campaigns, prior affiliations with other groups, access to information, and volunteer base. They may be parents, members of the LGBTQ+ community, professional librarians, political organizers, business owners, or social activists. Advocates’ knowledge base around libraries, related issues, laws, and policies varies. Credentialed professional librarians serving as county-level First Amendment advocates have unparalleled knowledge and authority on the consequential outcomes faced with winning censorship campaigns. They have large networks, are tech savvy, and — with their background on these issues — can easily engage with the media and public speaking.
What is Working

We asked advocates about their wins and how they made it happen. They told us about the work, how they do it, who they work with, and what builds confidence in other advocates.

Persistence pays off — civic engagement in every county has increased because of book banning campaigns. Every advocate talked about burnout and risk, knowing their work involves hearing hours of hateful debate and mean-spirited public comments that will likely conclude with the passage of a book ban. Having a large group of people to attend meetings is helpful and they often meet new people wanting to get involved more formally. Recruiting and retaining volunteers to show up consistently is key. These activists don’t need to have a big role; many have full time jobs and families. Volunteers can be delegated to many roles: checking the calendars and public meeting announcements, managing social media accounts and email lists, note taking, video recording, event planning, speaker coordination, or one of many other tasks. Social media is the primary way advocate groups are organizing. The Rutherford County group formalized into a 501c4, Rutherford County Library Alliance. The original McMinn County group is now working with McMinn Neighbors and SOCM. Advocates responding in their local community are powerful and officials are taking note.

Advocates said at least one person from the group should attend any public meetings where libraries and books may be a topic. This includes County Commission, City Council, County Library Board, County School Board, and other committees. Existing knowledge of local governance and where to locate information online is helpful when finding calendars, agendas, meeting minutes, locations, board members' names and contact information. Familiarity with local officials and the quirks of local government make it much easier to navigate these processes. Having relationships and experience with political organizing and advocacy to draw on existing networks of people, resource sharing, and the ability to navigate and understand policy is also helpful. For example, filing a Public Records Request is an intense process that requires background knowledge on state laws and skills navigating government websites. This also requires following instructions to file a formal request, including the ability to fill out and submit forms then choosing how and where to use the information once it is released.

Advocates discussed the small and large networks of people they could draw on. This included personal connections, party affiliations, and professional organizations. Partnerships with other organizations are critically important but difficult to establish, a big reach is valuable! Larger organizations that share news and calls to action can increase awareness and civic engagement. They remind people that book bans and censorship campaigns are a part of a larger effort to defund public education and control information for everyone.
Lessons Learned and Barriers

We asked advocates about what gets in the way and the lessons they have learned. They told us about the soft skills, capacity, politics, and the technical issues that slow them down or limit their impact.

The stigma about LGBTQ+ people, especially children, and the misinformation and hateful speech is difficult to stomach. Getting started is very challenging for people with no experience organizing, but the more people there are involved, the less likely they are to experience burnout. Apathy feels almost impossible to overcome and is a big reason why people tell advocates they won't get involved. Coordinating people and keeping them engaged is a universal challenge, especially when book banning or attention-grabbing public comments are not in the news every day. Coalition work is hard because of competing interests and fundraising efforts, but partnering with other organizations is ultimately a helpful way to share resources. In small towns and rural communities it can be dangerous to be a librarian or a library advocate because of the threats and harassment that follow hateful rhetoric or disparaging public comments made about librarians and libraries. This is also why convincing people to run for office is a big ask, especially in a rural county or small town.

Not having the infrastructure or funding to organize effectively limits people's ability to advocate and reach people. Keeping track of government calendars, agendas, and meeting minutes is a lot of work and feels futile at times because advocates know some officials violate Tennessee’s Sunshine Laws. Practically, advocates are unable to know what is actually happening when officials do not follow their own procedures. Many of the officials advocating for book bans, censorship, book restrictions, or restructuring of the library board do not understand the purpose and function of a public library. In addition, many officials do not understand how libraries work, the policies already in place to review books, or appreciate that librarians are trained professionals.

Support and Resources Needed

After advocates told us about the barriers holding them back, we asked for their wish list of the little things to the major changes and investments necessary to be most effective.

Advocates say connecting with existing networks, knowledge of government processes and partnerships, experience with politics, organizing and capacity building, the willingness to delegate, and tenacity are some of what it takes to succeed. Still, they need a bigger audience, training, and cash infusions to support people and organizing efforts. Advocates were very specific about needing financial resources to pay organizers, create websites to centralize resources and calendars, and to have platforms for email campaigns, contact lists, and text and phone banking. Some advocates have access to these resources through their networks, but generally speaking advocates are working in silos because they have no money. There was also an overwhelming need expressed to train organizers and volunteers about policy, advocacy 101, civic engagement, fundraising, strategic planning, message
building, volunteer recruitment, and media engagement. They also need assistance with messaging at the local level while connecting with larger organizations who will amplify the news and events to a broader audience. Advocates told us that they need state and national organizations, politicians and the Democratic Party to raise awareness about what is happening in small, rural communities to reach a national audience. Stories that have “gone viral” increase awareness and engagement short term, but they want assistance with raising the issues as a part of a bigger strategy around campaigns for censorship and eliminating access to information. To raise this issue, support from the state leaders and the Democratic Party would show voters across the state how small communities and rural counties are bellwethers for threats to First Amendment Rights in Tennessee (and across the nation). Rural counties need assistance recruiting candidates to run for office because the stakes are higher now that school board races are partisan and community advocates face harassment and threats.

Conclusions

Tennessee’s public libraries, public schools, and the professionals who manage them are being attacked by well-funded censorship campaigns and bad actors, building on laws that have codified anti-LGBTQ+ and racist policies in schools. Many book removal requests are filed by individuals from the community, but more of them are being filed by officials serving on county commissions, county library boards, and city councils. This is happening in metropolitan areas, small communities, and rural counties, banning books and materials, restricting books by age, and placing books behind counters. Books with themes or characters about LGBTQ+ and people of color are the primary targets for censorship in Tennessee. Librarians, library staff, and advocates are being harassed and threatened, sometimes enough to make them leave their jobs or retreat from advocacy. This report draws on the reports from library advocates in Anderson, Maury, McMinn, Rutherford, and Wilson Counties who are librarians, nonprofit leaders, parents, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. They are all passionate defenders of the First Amendment and have varied experiences with advocacy, organizing, and local government processes. Advocates are generously sharing their experiences, perspectives, unique approaches, and the ongoing work they are doing to combat book bans and censorship campaigns for the benefit of other advocates across Tennessee.

Tennessee Equality Project is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with a 20-year history of advocacy in public policy working closely with allied partners, engaging with the public through education and outreach to advance the equal rights for all LGBTQIA+ children, youth, and adults in Tennessee. Tennessee Equality Project is actively working to stop the accelerating, yet preventable, mental and physical suffering, isolation, poverty and homelessness caused by public misinformation campaigns, discriminatory state and local policies, and political ill-will affecting LGBTQIA+ children, youth, adults, and elders.
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

-The First Amendment to the United States Constitution, Ratified December 15, 1791

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution is the first of 10 amendments included in the Bill of Rights that guarantees five freedoms to anyone in the United States, regardless of age, residency, or citizenship status. The original draft of James Madison’s Free Speech Clause was adopted by the Senate and House of Representatives following several iterations. Madison’s original text included “The people shall not be deprived or abridged of their right to speak, to write, or to publish their sentiments; and the freedom of the press, as one of the great bulwarks of liberty, shall be inviolable.”

Dig deep on the First Amendment here. https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/amendment-1/
Table of Contents

Executive Summary ............................................................................................................. I
First Amendment to the United States Constitution .......................................................... X
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1
American Library Association Council, Library Bill of Rights ........................................... 2
American Library Association, Censorship by the Numbers ............................................... 3
Anderson County, Case Study ......................................................................................... 4
Tennessee State Constitution, Section 19 ......................................................................... 5
Anderson County, Advocate Interview ............................................................................ 6
The Miller Test and Community Standards ..................................................................... 8
Maury County, Case Study .............................................................................................. 9
Tennessee Open Meetings and Open Records Acts ............................................................ 10
Maury County, Advocate Interview ................................................................................. 11
American Association of School Libraries, National School Library Standards .......... 13
McMinn County, Case Study ......................................................................................... 14
American Library Association, Top 10 Banned Books .................................................. 16
McMinn County, Advocate Interview ............................................................................. 17
Graphic Novels ............................................................................................................... 19
Rutherford County, Case Study ....................................................................................... 21
Rutherford County, Advocate Interview .......................................................................... 22
Guide to Attend and Speak at Public Meetings ................................................................. 25
Wilson County, Case Study ............................................................................................ 28
Wilson County, Advocate Interview .............................................................................. 30
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................... 32
References ..................................................................................................................... 33
Appendices ..................................................................................................................... 42
Introduction

Tennessee’s publicly funded libraries and school libraries are being flogged by pro-censorship activists, bad actors, and large organizations acting like a grassroots movement. A handful of extremist officials are subverting democratic norms and skirting around laws too. This has become a major theme in partisan school board elections. Manufacturing fear, under the guise of “protecting children” that is based on individual beliefs and ideological affiliations, is the vehicle for the fierce campaign against the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The mission is to ban access to information by removing books, restricting access, reclassifying age recommendations, and shelving books behind the counter. Book banning across Tennessee has made international headlines and the same combative campaign to squash access to information is happening in the other 49 states. Seven of the top 10 banned books in 2023 were LGBTQ+ content and all 10 books were listed for sexually explicit content. Racial diversity and topics on social issues were also among the top reasons claimed for bans.

Children, youth, and students deserve access to books and library materials that reflect who they are — or in their pursuit of personal discovery, to challenge their minds and help them understand the world around them, to build character, to encourage curiosity about science and technology. To question history. And to help them find their way through tough times. The themes, characters and stories in nearly all of the banned books are reflected in the people, in historical or contemporary social issues, and the experiences of people pushed into marginalized communities — like those who are, or perceived to be, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, LGBTQ+, disabled, poor, or non-English speakers. Themes around race and LGBTQ+ people are the primary targets of book bans in Tennessee. Notably, Tennessee has enacted more bills than any state targeting LGBTQ+ youth and their likeness in schools. Public libraries serve as safe spaces too, with access to books and materials that may be restricted, unavailable at school, or out of reach at home.

Across Tennessee, there are hundreds of librarians, educators, parents, students, elected officials, and seasoned advocates pushing back to protect access to information and support public libraries and schools. These First Amendment and intellectual freedom fighters are organizing, collaborating, running for office, educating, and just stepping up to defend public libraries and public school libraries. These advocates are showing up again and again for children, public libraries, school libraries, and the trained professionals charged with their care.

To create this report, advocates from Anderson, Maury, McMinn, Rutherford, and Wilson Counties generously shared their stories and resources to support fellow and future advocates across the state. As a primer, this report summarizes their experience and expertise, where they get their information on government processes and news, who they partner with, and what is working. They also shared lessons learned and what support they see is needed for advocates to be more empowered and effective in this work. Background information on book banning, libraries, and the related topics for the five counties were found in print and digital news, meetings, agendas, minutes and videos. Research articles and publications from professional societies were also an important source. Interviews, county profiles, collective themes from the interviews, and other related resources are included in the supporting documents and one-pagers. Resources, organizations, and other tools are in the Appendix.
The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

V. A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

VI. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.

VII. All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.


https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations
CENSORSHIP
BY THE NUMBERS

In 2023, the American Library Association documented the highest number of titles targeted for censorship since ALA began compiling data more than 20 years ago. 4,240 unique titles were challenged last year, up from 2,571 targeted in 2022. Learn more at ala.org/bbooks

WHO INITIATES ATTEMPTS TO CENSOR BOOKS?

- 28% Patrons
- 24% Parents
- 21% Pressure groups
- 13% Board/administration
- 3% Librarians/teachers/staff
- 2% Elected officials/government
- 9% Other/unknown

WHERE DO CENSORSHIP ATTEMPTS TAKE PLACE?

- 54% Public libraries
- 39% School libraries
- 5% Higher education/other

Books and Beyond

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 1,247 censorship attempts in 2023. Here's the breakdown:

- 76% Books, graphic novels
- 4% Displays
- 4% Access (library closures, funding, bomb threats)
- 4% Hate crimes (vandalism, theft of materials representing marginalized groups)
- 3% Programs
- 2% Films
- 6% Other

CENSORSHIP ON THE RISE

The unparalleled number of unique titles targeted in 2023 marked a 65% increase over 2022. During the two decades prior to 2021, the average number of unique titles targeted per year was 273.

NUMBER OF UNIQUE TITLES CHALLENGED BY YEAR

- 1,858 (2021)
- 2,571 (2022)
- 4,240 (2023)
Anderson County

Pop. 71,123
19 Public Schools
5 Public Libraries

It is the mission of the Anderson County Libraries to inform, educate, culturally enrich, and entertain the citizens of Anderson County, Tennessee. In an effort to fulfill the libraries’ mission, the staff of the Clinton Public Library is committed to the following principles: Equal access to information and resources; Quality customer service; Intellectual freedom; Confidentiality and Privacy; Literacy and love of reading; and Life-long learning

The Challenge

The American Libraries Association spotlighted Anderson County’s Clinton Library as a high profile example of the widespread censorship campaigns happening in public libraries in 2023. Since late 2022, censorship activists and like-minded officials in Anderson County have been persistent in their efforts to ban and restrict access to books and materials, going so far as to propose restructuring the library board’s oversight and functions. Under the oft-cited guise of “protecting children,” it began with challenges to the location of materials that include age-appropriate LGBTQ+ representation for children. Since then, the pro-censorship arguments in Anderson County have expanded into all ages materials that predominantly feature characters, stories, or topics related to LGBTQ+ and minority racial identities, sex education, and social justice. There has been a growing vocal minority of pro-censorship individuals, including the Anderson County Mayor, the Sheriff, a handful of Commissioners, and community members calling for the removal of many more books, requests for criminal investigation, calls for the resignations and threats to the librarians, staff, and trustees. This has occurred during public meetings, comments, letters to the editor in the local paper The Courier News, and social media that call to question policies, procedures, and the integrity of librarians and staff.

“I spent my entire childhood in the church and a good portion not knowing or understanding anything outside of it, knowing that I did not feel right in my own body and any questions I had were passed over and never answered and up front and honest. Having these materials or representation would have helped me from preventing my first suicide attempt. I felt wrong in my existence because it did not match anyone else that was around me at first. The first Representation was introduced to me in high school when I joined the GSTA and I found other students that were like me and questioned their own existence. Classmates that did not feel correct in their own body but had each other to talk to about it. We did not have our parents. We did not have anyone else. As an Anderson County resident, please do not get rid of educational materials that might help somebody prevent their suicide. I have one last thing to say, everyone in this room is precious, loved, and worthy of being and feeling safe in their own body, thank you.”

-Eli, a young speaker at the Anderson County Library Board Meeting, March, 27, 2023
Article I, Section 19: That the printing presses shall be free to every person to examine the proceedings of the Legislature; or of any branch or officer of the government, and no law shall ever be made to restrain the right thereof. The free communication of thoughts and opinions, is one of the invaluable rights of man and every citizen may freely speak, write, and print on any subject, being responsible for the abuse of that liberty. But in prosecutions for the publication of papers investigating the official conduct of officers, or men in public capacity, the truth thereof may be given in evidence; and in all indictments for libel, the jury shall have a right to determine the law and the facts, under the direction of the court, as in other criminal cases.

Tennessee Constitution, 1870

Anderson County Interview

Anderson County Public Library Advocate Chase Lindsey (he/him) is a community leader in Anderson County, Tennessee. As the lead community organizer and Vice Chair with the Anderson County Democrats, Chase brings a wealth of experience in political organizing and participating in high stakes communications. He has an in-depth understanding of local government processes and draws on his experience and working relationships with Anderson County Commissioners and Boards, retired teachers, parents, and PFLAG Oak Ridge Co-Chairs, John Jaruzel and Anne Backus.

Strategy and People Power

Chase has been serving as an information gathering and sharing resource for the Anderson County community, leaning on access to existing infrastructure for text banking and email content management systems to increase turnout at local meetings. He also speaks with community groups, has written multiple Letters to the Editor in *The Courier News*, presents at local meetings, and maintains trusted relationships with members of the Anderson County Commission and Boards to hold open communication. Organizers and advocates across the county are focused on issues around public education in general, and not limited only to library issues. They understand that library censorship and book banning campaigns are part of a larger effort to dismantle public education.

How are you organizing, increasing capacity, and sustaining involvement?

- Primarily email outreach and mass texting, reaching 500+ people.
- Sharing on Anderson County Democrats social media.
- Partnering with other advocates and coalitions.
- Communicating directly 1:1 with local and elected officials.
- Coordinating attendance for public meetings, signing up speakers, WEAR BLUE.
- Speaking during public comment periods.
- Engaging with media, including print and digital, *The Courier News*.
- Recruiting candidates for school board, other elected bodies, or appointments to library boards.

Where do you get news and information about the issues?

- *The Courier News*
- *The Oak Ridger*
- *Knoxville News Sentinel*
- *Anderson County Democrats*
- *Washington Post*
- *New York Times*
- Pro-censorship social media accounts

“Another struggle, common across the board in advocacy spaces, is the intimidation from the volume of hateful speech and anger pushing allies out. Emotional strain from this is also impacting librarians and teachers who have been doxxed.”

- Chase Lindsey
What is working?

Persistence, relationship building and networking, plus the political acumen for advocacy in local government pays off, but is a ton of work. An example of this was bridging the divide between local parent groups and library board trustees for two of the books. The compromise created a “dummy box” that includes the front and back cover on the shelf that can be taken to the circulation desk for retrieval. This is a book restriction for all ages, but it also doesn’t outright remove them either, showing that progress is possible. Book banning has greatly increased civic engagement for those who have little or no history with local government.

Lessons Learned

Figuring out how to coordinate people and resources to out compete the extreme ideologies that are also embedded in the local government is challenging, especially when these topics come up in state legislation. Combating hate speech is tough when local leadership are participating because the vocal censorship minority increases biased awareness and knowledge about the issues. And it is hard to keep library advocates motivated when these issues aren’t in the daily news or on the meeting agenda. Professional networking and social media are key tools too because Anderson County lacks a local TV station as part of the greater Knoxville media market.

Needed Support

★ Training for civic engagement is lacking but necessary for successful local advocates.
★ Volunteers cannot keep up. Paid people power and coordination are needed to sustain efforts.
★ Local advocates need formal groups or coalitions with funding and infrastructure to effectively counter the book censorship campaigns.
★ Partnerships, organizations, and the political will to recruit people to run and vote for local and state officials and support policies for safe and inclusive public schools and libraries is needed.

Books targeted in Anderson County, ultimately retained.
The Miller Test is a recurring theme around censorship efforts in civil debate - and uncivil arguments - across Tennessee. Many legal scholars study this complex issue and this reference is by no means legal guidance. The Miller Test is used to determine what’s obscene based on individual beliefs and values, and the subjective value of the work in a court of law, not the court of public opinion. Advocates should have a familiarity with the Miller Test and the associated references that are increasingly being made regarding what are and who defines “community standards.”

The Supreme Court of the United State issued a majority ruling in Miller v. California (1973) that has since been referred to as the Miller Test: A 3-part tool for jurors who are hearing criminal court cases related to obscene materials. Since the 1973 ruling, there have been many challenges about what “community standards” might be. Defining community standards is subject to bias, individuals, place, and time. It is even more complicated in our current era of freely accessible internet and social media. Layperson advocates referring to the Miller Test as evidence against censorship campaigns should do so with caution.

The Miller Test consists of three parts that together serve as a tool for jurors to determine if something is obscene in a criminal court of law:

1. whether the average person applying contemporary community standards would find the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;
2. whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and
3. whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

Resources to dig deeper can be found at the Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University, https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/

1 The Miller Test. https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/miller-test/
2 Community Standards. https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/community-standards/
4 “Community” means the judicial district, as defined in TCA § 16-2-506
5 Prurient interest” means a shameful or morbid interest in sex, as defined in TCA § 39-17-901
Maury County

Pop. 106,746
22 Public Schools
2 Public Libraries

Maury County Library mission is “To serve as Maury County’s cultural epicenter by providing equitable access to information, literature, technology, art, and culture.”

The Challenge

Maury County has experienced escalating demands for library censorship, book bans and restrictions with a targeted focus on LGBTQ+ themed books. Maury County Library houses approximately 110,000 books and materials with only 423 LGBTQ+ themed. Censorship fever began after a June 2022 Pride Month book display at the Maury County Library. Since that time, the topic has been a recurring agenda item in nearly every Maury County Commission and Library Board agenda. There have been speakers present during every public comment period. In October 2022, the Library Director resigned after calls for removal; they have yet to hire a replacement. Since the beginning, LGBTQ+ community advocates have purchased books to add to the collection for circulation, but many of the titles have reportedly been lost, stolen, or yet to be shelved.

Book removal requests have been submitted by a small handful of vocal censorship activists, including those within their official capacity. Ironically, one of them was refused the right to speak on the library topic because his sovereign citizenship declaration was disclosed. By revoking his citizenship he did not qualify to speak publicly. Unfortunately, the Library Board meeting agenda isn’t posted online and the meeting minutes are inconsistently posted. An important note is, similar in different municipalities, that official minutes misrepresent the topic and the level of engagement by library advocates. Following his August 2023 Public Records Request filing, under the Tennessee Public Records Act, Maury County advocate Lukas Banks received a large collection of detailed information on the censorship campaign. It revealed the small group of Maury County residents and some county officials who were coordinating in private through text messages, emails, and social media posts. Similar to what advocates in Rutherford County have experienced, the Library Board minutes barely mention the conversation and public comments about library censorship. Details about the Tennessee Public Records and Public Meetings Acts, also known as “Sunshine Laws,” are in the References. An example of the Public Records Request filing is in the Appendix.

Public Comment:

Six visitors spoke during the public comment period. Most were upset that the books they wanted put in the Adult section had not been moved. One visitor offered his appreciation to Dr. Martin and the Library Board.

Example of minimal summary of public comments. Maury County Library Board meeting minutes, August, 23, 2023.
Tennessee Sunshine Laws

Tennessee Open Meetings Act
“The Tennessee Open Meetings Act declares that the formation of public policy and public business must be transacted transparently and not in secret. Tenn. Code Ann. § 8-44-101(a). To accomplish this goal, the Tennessee Open Meetings Act requires that all meetings of a governing body be open to the public, that a governing body provide adequate public notice of the meeting, and in certain circumstances, that the governing body provide a period for public comment regarding agenda items. Local government legislative bodies are required to provide an agenda at least 48 hours in advance of a meeting. Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 8-44-102, 8-44-103, 2023 Public Chapters 0213 and 0300. There are exceptions unless debate and decision making occurs during meetings. Two additional laws were passed in 2023 that added specific information on how governing bodies post agendas and modify them, scheduling meetings, signing up to speak, and time requirements for public comments “germane to items on the agenda.” They may place “reasonable restrictions” on the length of time, number of speakers and balancing “both sides.” Ironically, the Tennessee General Assembly is exempt from the Tennessee Open Meetings Act. The Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, Open Records Council has a frequently asked questions page with details on the Act.

Tennessee Public Records Act
The Act “shall be broadly construed so as to give the fullest possible public access to public records.” T.C.A. § 10-7-505(d). The Act requires that all state, county, and municipal records be open for public inspection during normal business hours unless the records are confidential. The overarching provision of the Act is found at T.C.A. § 10-7-503(a)(2)(A) and reads: All state, county and municipal records shall, at all times during business hours, which for public hospitals shall be during the business hours of their administrative offices, be open for personal inspection by any citizen of this state, and those in charge of the records shall not refuse such right of inspection to any citizen, unless otherwise provided by state law.

1 Tennessee Open Meetings Act
2 Public Chapter 213, 2023 Amendment
3 Public Chapter 300, 2023 Amendment
4 Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury FAQ's for Sunshine Laws
5 Tennessee Open Records Act
Maury County Interview

Maury County Library Advocate Lukas Banks (he/him) is an LGBTQ+ community leader and Founding President of PFLAG Columbia in Maury County, Tennessee. Lukas is a lifelong advocate with extensive experience navigating local government and advocacy spaces. He partners with the Tennessee Equality Project, other nonprofit advocates, and LGBTQ+ families across Middle Tennessee. Lukas knows the in’s and out’s of county government structure and function for decision making at the county and city government, including the Library Board. After filing a Public Records Request, he learned who in Maury County government, including private citizens, officials, and censorship groups involved with submitting the book removal requests.

Strategy and People Power

The politics of library censorship in Maury County makes organizing a challenge. Like other Tennessee counties facing replicas of the same censorship campaigns, Maury County advocates strategize with a core group of trusted people. They also communicate with elected and appointed members of the county. They carefully plan announcements to allow for breaks between events to reduce volunteer fatigue. Facebook has been the primary tool for event planning, recruiting topic-specific speakers at meetings, and making topic recommendations for speakers.

How are you organizing, recruiting, and strategizing?

- Keeping up with the County website for meetings, agendas, and minutes.
- Facebook and TikTok, tagging accounts with a lot of followers and using relevant #
- Email campaigns.
- Attending public meetings, signing up speakers, recruiting others to attend.
- Media engagement.
- Partner with other advocates, coalitions.

What is working?

Maury County advocates are making outstanding progress in every area, a direct result of tenacious dedication, passion, time, and emotional labor. It is important to note that for Lukas, this work has been consequential to his safety. Information released from the Public Records Request revealed the labyrinthine coordination among Maury County officials, community members, and individuals from censorship campaigns. Unfortunately, it also showed how County Officials were not only making public homophobic

Where do you get news and information about the issues?

- Designated advocates monitor the Library Board and County Commission meeting calendars and agendas.
- Contact with elected officials and appointed members in the County and Library Board.
- Information supplied from the Public Open Records Request. An example is in the Appendix.
threats and harassing comments on social media, officials were also sharing them in text messages. Strategic recruiting of new advocates has increased numbers. Assisting people to speak on the topic by giving them the details for meeting times, dates, and locations is helpful. Providing a detailed summary of events and specific actions advocates can take, while also explaining the processes, summaries, and what outcome they are working towards is important. It has also been valuable to identify and name the officials who are pushing for censorship because community advocates want to know where this is coming from.

Lessons Learned and Needed Support

Not all Maury County government is functioning in the open like it is supposed to, legally. Officials are also not being legally held to account, even when they are not following Sunshine Laws. Filing a Public Records Request is an important tool when it comes to understanding what may be happening behind closed doors, including decisions and discussions about book bans. Legal representation is not stepping up to tackle these issues in the courts. No focused efforts to protect the First Amendment rights to free speech in locales victim to book banning and censorship campaigns are happening. Elected officials who can operate outside of the laws without consequence have no reason to stop. Advocates experiencing threats and harassment need legal assistance and guidance to effectively fight these campaigns. Other support that is needed includes larger organizations amplifying local news related to censorship campaigns. Assistance with event planning, policy summaries, and plain language explanations of government processes would be useful.

The Public Records Request that I did showed us a huge amount of issues with our elected leaders having secret meetings. It tells us exactly who’s doing what, when, how, and why. This makes it easier to push for a replacement of these corrupt individuals with people who are NOT friendly to the LGBTQ community, and or against book bans. Many Republicans, Democrats, and Independents in our area are now aware of how corrupt this whole thing has been, and some have spoken against these individuals and according to our sources a few have thought about leaving certain Parties due to the leadership support of such awful stances.

-Lukas Banks
Six Common Beliefs that define the qualities of well-prepared learners, effective school librarians, and dynamic school libraries and are central to the school library profession:

- The school library is a unique and an essential part of a learning community.
- Qualified school librarians lead effective school libraries.
- Learners should be prepared for college, career, and life.
- Reading is the core of personal and academic competency.
- Intellectual freedom is every learner’s right.
- Information technologies must be appropriately integrated and equitably available.

IN THE STANDARDS remodeling process, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) reviewed Common Beliefs from earlier AASL Standards and official AASL position statements. These documents, and feedback collected from more than 1,300 school librarians and stakeholders nationally, provided AASL with a clear expression of the qualities of well-prepared learners, effective school librarians, and dynamic school libraries. Visit the link for detailed information, https://standards.aasl.org/beliefs/
The Challenge in McMinn County Schools

The McMinn County School Board sparked a nationwide conversation and international condemnation after banning a Pulitzer Prize winning book about the legacy of horrific truths about the Holocaust from public education. On January 10, 2022, with few Board members initially defending the book, they voted (10-0) to remove *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, by Art Spiegelman from the 8th grade English Language curriculum. A Board Member submitted the removal request and it was unclear if and who had ever read the book. A librarian and teacher defended the value of using *Maus* in education and the importance of teaching complex topics in uniquely accessible ways. Members complained about the illustrations – in *Maus*, humans are represented exclusively in animal forms – depicting violence, nudity, the topic of suicide, and “vulgar language” as justification for removal. The story went viral after being posted to social media by the Tennessee Holler and on February 10, 2022 more than 150 grassroots advocates, librarians, educators, and parents attended the Board. Many spoke in strong support of *Maus* and the First Amendment. However, the Board was not moved to reverse their original decision. On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, 2022, the School Board posted a defense of the book’s removal. Board Member Cochran posted his justification for removing the book on social media with misleading inferences about *Maus* as “graphic comic” and a “comic”, a common tactic used to discredit graphic novels. Both of these posts misdirect the horror of the Holocaust and devalues fact-based visually compelling storytelling. In February 2022, the ACLU of Tennessee filed an open records request because it appears that the Board did not follow their own existing policies for the book review and removal process. And on October 5, 2023, the Board updated their public comment policy, restricting speakers to one person per side of an issue, only if it is already included on the agenda.
Prior to the public outcry from the January 2022 Maus decision by the McMinn County School Board, book removal requests had been a recurring discussion at the McMinn County Library Board meeting. Just six months earlier in June 2021, the McMinn County Library Board responded to book banning activists by moving the Pride month book display to the back of the library. Since that time, the fight over book banning has played an outsized role in public comment periods, local elections, and fractured the community. Just one month before Tennessee’s July 1, 2023 “anti-drag” law would be in effect, a June Pride month display of 21 books was quickly taken down in Athens' E.G. Fisher Public Library. The request was made by Athens’ Mayor Steven Sherlin and Vice Mayor Larry Eaton. Mayor Sherlin defended his request for removal as a private citizen and Christian, also claiming that he was responding to complaints from the community. Many local library advocates spoke publicly about the events at the City Council meeting, noting the importance of access to LGBTQ+ inclusive books for youth. They also spoke about concerns from the conflicts of interest and influence from elected officials making demands of the library when they control the funding for local public services. The city attorney reviewed an ethics complaint and found no wrong-doing. Like every other community battling book bans, librarians and staff were threatened, harassed, or doxxed. Nearly 350 community members petitioned for the library director's resignation or removal. Although the Pride display was taken down, the books remain in circulation and the E.G. Fisher Library Director resigned in August of 2023. McMinn County library advocates continue to raise awareness of the harmful anti-LGBTQ+ messaging sent to area youth from the actions taken by officials.
The American Library Association documented 1,247 attempts to censor materials and services at libraries, schools, and universities in 2023. Of the 4,240 unique titles that were challenged or banned in 2023, here are the top 10 most frequently challenged.

### TOP 10 MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2023

1. **Gender Queer** by Maia Kobabe
   **Reasons:** LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit

2. **All Boys Aren’t Blue** by George M. Johnson
   **Reasons:** LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit

3. **This Book Is Gay** by Juno Dawson
   **Reasons:** LGBTQIA+ content, sex education, claimed to be sexually explicit

4. **The Perks of Being a Wallflower** by Stephen Chbosky
   **Reasons:** claimed to be sexually explicit, LGBTQIA+ content, rape, drugs, profanity

5. **Flamer** by Mike Curato
   **Reasons:** LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit

6. **The Bluest Eye** by Toni Morrison
   **Reasons:** rape, incest, claimed to be sexually explicit, EDI content

7/8. **Me and Earl and the Dying Girl** by Jesse Andrews
   **Reasons:** claimed to be sexually explicit, profanity

9. ** Tricks** by Ellen Hopkins
   **Reasons:** claimed to be sexually explicit, drugs, rape, LGBTQIA+ content

10. **Let’s Talk About It** by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan
    **Reasons:** claimed to be sexually explicit, sex education, LGBTQIA+ content

11. **SOLD** by Patricia McCormick
    **Reasons:** claimed to be sexually explicit, rape

---

**OFFICE FOR Intellectual Freedom**
American Library Association
McMinn County Interview

McMinn County Library Advocate Alex Sharp, MLIS (she/her), Director of Library and Information Services at Tennessee Wesleyan University, specializes in Open Educational Resources Access and Archives. She also serves on the Tennessee Library Association’s Informational Freedom Committee. As the former Vice-Chair of the McMinn Democratic Party, Alex has a lengthy background in politics, and the historical context of the purpose, function, and controversies of libraries. It is because of this background, fully supporting the First Amendment, and witnessing the attacks on librarians over the graphic novel *Maus*, that propelled Alex into the public eye as a fierce advocate for libraries and children’s access to inclusive books.

Strategy and People Power

A core group of individuals, community advocates and organizers quickly responded after the first meeting. But they needed many more people. As a leader in the professional library community, Alex has been able to lean on her expertise and educational background to understand the policies and how to organize people. As a former leader and active member of the McMinn County Democratic Party, Alex also has a large network and reach into the community. The nonprofit SOCM (Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment) has stepped up, working with the McMinn Neighbors to coordinate and train advocates. Their #PublicSchoolStrongTN campaign includes training for advocates on the in’s and out’s of school board meetings, planning, and organizing attendance and speakers. Following the exposure of McMinn Public Schools book banning efforts, censorship activists carried the attack on books to the McMinn Public Library system when government officials demanded the removal of a June 2023 Pride month book display.

How are you organizing, recruiting, and strategizing?

★ Organizing on social media.
★ Partnering with other advocates, McMinn County Neighbors and SOCM
★ Communicating with locally elected officials.
★ Speaking during public comment periods.
★ Attending public meetings, signing up speakers, recruiting others to attend.
★ Engaging with television and print media.
★ Recruiting candidates for elections to school board or other elected bodies, or appointments to library boards.

Where do you get news and information about the issues?

★ Tennessee Library Association
★ American Library Association
★ Chalkbeat Tennessee
★ McMinn County Neighbors
★ The Daily Yonder, Keep it Rural
★ The Tennessee Holler
★ Rural Assembly
★ Library advocates across the state
What is working?

Relationship building, creating new partnerships with other organizations like McMinn Neighbors and SOCM, and significantly increasing civic engagement for those who have little or no history with local government. Networking has increased coordination among a large number of advocates, all working towards a larger goal. Even more so after the June 2023 removal of the E.G. Fisher Public Library’s Pride month display and eventual resignation of the Library Director. Media attention has been vital to increasing engagement, bringing together new advocates, and keeping the spotlight on what is happening. Ongoing conversations with organizations like the McMinn Neighbors, Rural Assembly Everywhere, and the McMinn Democratic Party sustain local and regional awareness, particularly important in smaller and rural communities. On February 7, 2022, McMinn County community members, librarians, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Chattanooga hosted a Facebook event that featured Art Speigelman to speak about the events surrounding the banning of *Maus* in the 8th grade curriculum. This candid discussion had over 10,000 people join the virtual event. Attendees across the world wanted to hear from the author about his perspective on the events. News of the book ban reached into the business community, with publishers, artists, writers and book retailers making statements of support for public education and access to information. In Knoxville, Nirvana Comics, a Tennessee Equality Project Open for Business Partner, quickly responded to the news and controversy by creating a GoFundMe to purchase and ship *Maus* to kids across the state. However, they didn't anticipate the generous international response, eventually raising nearly $110,000, enough to ship more than a thousand books across all 50 states.

Lessons Learned

Keeping people engaged when it’s not in the national news is a challenge. In small rural communities like McMinn County, it feels nearly impossible to counter the most vocal pro-censorship activists who are pushing for a radical nationalism and abusing Christian scripture. It is even more difficult when local officials step in, whether or not they are acting in their official capacity. Similar to other rural areas, McMinn County lacks locally dedicated media. A small group of local advocates can still have a big impact, but burn out is likely and it’s nearly impossible to be anonymous.

Needed Support

★ Raising awareness of what is happening in small, rural communities when larger organizations and statewide advocates can reach a bigger audience.
★ Funding, training, and having the infrastructure for civic engagement in rural communities.
★ Ways to engage with people to stay informed and involved, with messaging that them know that voting for community leaders is key to protecting First Amendment Rights.
★ Recruiting and supporting candidates who support intellectual freedom and the right to access inclusive materials in libraries and schools.
★ Partnerships, organizations, and political will to recruit people to run and vote for local and state officials and support policies for safe and inclusive public schools and libraries.

“Yes, it has a few bad words in it, but in my opinion our kids are seeing way worse than that on YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat”
- Alex Sharp
**Graphic Novels**

Graphic novels are immersive books with illustrations, drawings, or other picture-like panels that have text in blocks, bars, or other spacing on the page. These vary in color, style, shape, size, and length, pulling the reader into the pages for them to build the story. Topics range from historical, autobiographical, STEM, social topics, BIPOC and LGBTQ+ topics and characters, science fiction, mythology, fantasy, geography, and other nonfiction topics. For reluctant readers, readers who are skill-building, English language learners, and readers with different learning abilities like dyslexia and autism, graphic novels are fantastic ways to engage these young students. The text is concise and the style of wording is helpful to make direct and clear connections with the story. For skilled and advanced readers, graphic novels have play with white space, the text, and layout on the page that can tell the story in different or nuanced ways.

Yes, they can look like a comic but they are full length books, cover to cover. Some of them are a few hundred pages! They are also great at breaking down complex and difficult topics that many young students are grappling with. Graphic novels are written for all ages and to help guide adults on book selections, publishers print age recommendations. While there are books for mature and adult readers, graphic novels are not “graphic” in nature. Although teachers were not #1 fans of comic books in the 1930’s, teachers and librarians are embracing the diversity of graphic novels and comics. Now you will find them in most classrooms and every school and public library.

---

Research is fascinating! Please visit the Visual Language Lab to read up on the research around the way our brains build meaning in comics and graphic novels by studying linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience. [https://www.visuallanguagelab.com/](https://www.visuallanguagelab.com/) for more information and resources.


To dig deeper on the history of comic books, graphic novels, censorship, and First Amendment advocacy, check out this link too [https://cbldf.org/comics-code-history-the-seal-of-approval/](https://cbldf.org/comics-code-history-the-seal-of-approval/)
Nirvana Comics Responds to *Maus* Book Banning in McMinn County

McMinn County, Tennessee is a small rural southeast county with around 5,000 K-12 students. On January 10, 2022, the McMinn County School Board unceremoniously voted 10-0 to remove the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, by Art Spiegelman from the 8th grade curriculum. But this rural county took the global stage soon after *The Tennessee Holler* posted the story. Bewilderment, disgust, and objection was swift. Only an hour drive from McMinn County, Knoxville’s Nirvana Comics co-owners Rich Davis, Grant and Jasmine Mitchell reacted by offering to lend a copy to any student who wanted one in Tennessee. As the news traveled and the outcry intensified, donations quickly exceeded their $20,000 GoFundMe campaign goal. Within six months, they had raised nearly $110,000, shipping over a thousand books, accompanied with a 10-page study guide to students in nearly every state. We spoke with Grant about the events surrounding the banning of Maus, what it means to him as a comic book enthusiast, business owner and bookseller, First Amendment fan, and how this singular event impacted the mission of the store and landed them into advocacy. We also talked about why comics and graphic novels are controversial and how the landscape of comics is becoming more inclusive.

“I am an adult with ADHD who has every learning disability in the book. Growing up I had all the help with special education I could get. The best way for me to learn things actually came in comic book form, in fact that’s how I learned the Bible. I also don’t think many people really understand how comics and graphic novels can break complicated things down and they aren’t just “the funnies in the paper” or dirty picture books. When the Maus book ban came up we all wanted to give away a copy to every student who wanted one. And I immediately ordered more copies of the book because we wanted to give even more away. But it blew up and we were shocked by the support. It was also really important to me as someone with ADHD and learning disabilities that other kids like me to have access to this book. You can tell a kid 6 million people were murdered, and if they are like me they will look at you and that’s not going to be real to them. But if you show it to them in a graphic novel, as painful as it is, that’s going to help them understand. It’s also why school is the perfect environment for them to be taught this horrible lesson. I also love how the comic book industry, publishers and writers, are expanding their stories to be more inclusive. It’s a conversation at every event happening now. And as a business owner, I believe that businesses need to believe in something and actually do something with it. There are other stores in Knoxville doing this too, like South Press Coffee. We are seeing all the book bans happening across the state, and the US, and that’s why we already keep a free little library in the shop. But we want to do more around banned books, as well as responding to the increasing book challenges against graphic novels, like all the bans on *Gender Queer*. That’s why I ordered a bunch for the shop. This is also why it’s so important to me personally and what we do as business owners — and a big reason why we stepped up for Maus.” - Grant Mitchell

Jasmine and Grant Mitchell
The Challenge

In 2023, the battle over First Amendment Rights in Tennessee reached a fever pitch among pro-censorship activists and officials in Rutherford County — and its county seat, Murfreesboro. The overlap was an inevitable consequence of the Tennessee legislature’s intense focus on discriminating against LGBTQ+ youth and adults in private and public spaces, education, and libraries at the state and local levels, as shown in the many laws signed by the Governor. On June 15, 2023, the City Council of Murfreesboro adopted a “Community Safety Standards Ordinance” that effectively labeled being an LGBTQ+ person as an obscenity or related topics in printed materials. The ordinance was an overreaction, and over-compliance, to both the Tennessee Adult Entertainment Act, aka the anti-drag law that would go into effect on July 1. Tennessee Equality Project was refused permitting for BoroPride festival which led to a lawsuit and eventual $500,000 settlement from the city. Murfreesboro Council also referenced the Age Appropriate Materials Act of 2022 (Public Chapter 744). However, PC744 only applies to public and charter schools in Tennessee, not public libraries.

Over the course of the 2023, the Rutherford County Library System Board restructured the book review process, including ignoring the librarians recommendations; removed copies of multiple books that are primarily LGBTQ+ themed graphic novels and books; created an age-graduated library card system intended to restrict all book access for minors. Although officials claim book removals are to protect children and comply with the law, and the ordinance in Murfreesboro, they effectively remove books for adults too. On January 11, 2024, the Murfreesboro City Council quietly and unanimously repealed the “Community Decency Standards” ordinance. The Rutherford County Steering Committee has not yet proposed the process for RCLS Board review of all Requests for Consideration. Advocates have organized attendance at meetings, created a petition, and formalized their group into a nonprofit, Rutherford County Library Alliance. They have elevated their public presence locally and at the Tennessee Legislature. Free access to banned book requests was also created, bborobannedbooks.com.

Rutherford County Library Alliance Board Member Keri Lambert speaking at the November 6, 2023 Steering Committee Meeting, “At what time in the history of the world were the people who banned books the good guys?”
Rutherford County Interview

We spoke with two advocates from the Rutherford County Library Alliance who shared their passion and wealth of experience. They co-founded the Rutherford County Library Alliance (RCLA), gaining 501c4 nonprofit status in Tennessee. Tiffany Fee (she/her) is a parent, community advocate, President of the Rutherford County Library Alliance, and lifetime book lover. She quickly became a grassroots organizer with a handful of core advocates, starting with a community petition through the Free Speech nonprofit Every Library to fight censorship campaigns. She is now a candidate for her local school board and has been involved with the Rutherford County Democratic Party. One of her Rutherford County organizing partners, Keri Lambert (she/her), also spoke with us. Following the petition against the indecency ordinance Keri decided this was her fight too. Issues around libraries are close to her family because her spouse is a library science professor and former member of the Rutherford County Library Board. Her familiarity with government processes around the county commission, city council, school board, and the library board is beneficial to co-organizing.

Strategy and People Power

Rutherford County Library Alliance started as a Facebook group and currently has over 400+ members, recently growing into TikTok and Instagram to reach a broader, more diverse, and younger audience. They use personal and professional networks, one on one interactions, and web, social media, and email communications. As they grow strategically, staying up to date on local meetings with county leadership has equipped them with the knowledge to work with local and major media. They also partner with other advocates and organizations.

“ There are going to be times when you feel like no one cares and there’s no point in continuing what you’re doing. If you can push past that, it almost always leads to something positive. Sometimes it’s a new volunteer, a new small win for your cause, or someone reaching out to let you know they’re keeping up with what you’re doing. You just have to keep pushing and have at least one other person fighting alongside you who can carry the extra weight when you need to take a break.” - Tiffany Fee

Where do you get news and information about the issues?

★ PEN America.
★ American Library Association.
★ Co-sharing information with other advocacy groups fighting censorship campaigns.
Rutherford County

How are you organizing, increasing capacity, and sustaining involvement?

★ Communicating with local and elected officials.
★ Sending concise emails with specific calls to action with the necessary tools and messaging.
★ Sending email blasts with specific calls to action, tools, and messaging.
★ Using the contact list from the Fight for the First using EveryLibrary petitions.
★ Attending Library Board and any public meetings that may have library topics, signing up more speakers, recording proceedings and recruiting others to join the RCLA.
★ Building a website that will have content and news regarding everything happening around libraries in Rutherford County and serve as a larger resource for the community. This will include: detailed information on agendas, upcoming meetings, and follow ups after the meetings have occurred, links to information about Freedom to Read, Freedom to View, the ALA Library Bill of Rights and other resources.
★ Formalized the grassroots work being done with the RCLA group, achieving 501c4 status.
★ Engaging with the media effectively and adapting as needed.
★ Recruiting candidates for elections to the school board, or other elected bodies, has been tough because of the climate of attacks from members of the board and city council.

What is working?

Persistence and visibility have grown into a network of passionate community advocates in Rutherford County. Building out from existing networks has also been valuable, including leaning on existing relationships with large organizations like the Rutherford County Democrats. Getting major media attention and speaking with local media, with individuals, and other advocacy groups about how library censorship is more than just books is critical. Showing up regularly and being outspoken about their advocacy also signals to librarians and library staff that this is for their safety and security too.
Lessons Learned

The Rutherford County Library Board was feeling the pressure from growing numbers of advocates and people showing up for public comments. Now the official minutes that are recorded and approved falsely make the problem appear to be insignificant. For example, the Rutherford County Library Board has reduced minutes for each speaker down to a single word (Speaker Name = Library). Discovering that not every public meeting is video and audio recorded made planning and coordination extremely difficult. To adapt, someone from the group records every meeting. Collaborating with other advocacy groups that are focused on similar, but not directly related, issues has been a challenge because it’s tough to convince tired advocates to spread themselves thinner. Convincing the public that even a small amount of time, money, and persistence in your local community can make an impact on protecting the rights of all Tennesseans is very challenging.

Needed Support

★ Assistance with developing a formal strategy and talking points.
★ Messaging from statewide partners, like Tennessee Equality Project.
★ Finding community partners who will amplify information and strategy, like asking people to check out LGBTQ+ themed books, and books on the censorship lists, to keep them circulating.
★ Accessing contact lists for media, other advocacy groups, government officials, national organizations like PEN America, Unite Against Book Bans, and First Amendment oriented groups in local areas.
★ Media training to learn how to speak publicly and with local government.
★ Advocacy training on civic engagement, how to organize.
★ Accessing volunteer sign up templates for recruitment.
★ Training for development and fundraising compliance.
★ Access to a local government calendars that advocates can use for organizing at every opportunity.

It’s a marathon not a sprint, there’s so much more than just a few books. Not that a few books are OK, it’s just the governmental overreach, going against the experts opinions. Look at any country under a dictatorship and go back 10 years and see how things started. It’s what we are living right now. Restricting access to only state approved information, that’s terrifying.

-Keri Lambert
Guide to Attending and Speaking at Public Meetings
School Board, County Commission, City Council and Library Board
Adapted from United Against Book Bans Toolkit: PFLAG; The Education Trust, Tennessee; and Library Advocates in Tennessee

Prepare!
Do your homework on public meetings in your county, city, and district.

✓ Find the agenda, this outlines the topics for the meeting and what is scheduled. Tennessee state law requires agendas to be posted at least 48 hours in advance of a meeting, online or paper. The meeting minutes (aka notes) are recorded during the meeting and posted once they have been approved, usually at the beginning of the next scheduled meeting. Start with searches like “X-County/City School Board”, “X-County/City Library Board”, “X-County Commission”, “X-City Council”. You may have to hunt around, but most of these agencies publish the calendars, agendas, and past meeting minutes online. You can also find the different committees, members, and their contact information. Some smaller counties and cities may only have printed copies of agendas and minutes available and you will have to contact them directly. Most county and city agencies have Facebook pages and YouTube channels where they stream live meetings or archive old ones.

✓ Find the time, Location, Policies and Procedures for public meetings.

✓ Tennessee state law allows committees to set rules for how and when you can sign up to speak, the length of time and the number of people speaking. Take note in advance.
  ★ When the public comment period is during the meeting.
  ★ Amount of time to speak, usually 3-5 minutes per speaker.
  ★ How and when speakers can sign up.
  ★ Find out if there are rules or expectations from speakers, including conduct, dress code, or if you need to check in on arrival.
  ★ Watch archived videos of meetings to see how the process works and what the public comment period looks like in your community.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPEAKER’S PRIVACY AND SAFETY

Speaking up at a public meeting is an empowering experience but it is important to consider the consequences of having a public face. Be informed before you decide to speak. Many public meetings are streamed live on YouTube or Facebook and archived on the agency’s website. It’s worth the time to attend or watch the videos before deciding to speak. You can see how the meeting is structured, what and who are recorded, and displayed during public comments. For example, most public comment periods require that you state your name and street address and if you are affiliated with a group. Remember to use “I” statements and not to use other’s names or stories without their permission, especially children. Depending on the structure of the meeting and what is streamed or recorded, all of this information is freely available. If you are concerned about being outed, doxxed, or simply want to remain out of the public eye, remember that sitting quietly in a group is a strong statement of solidarity with other advocates. Sending emails directly to officials, making phone calls, and organizing behind the scenes are also powerful ways that you can use your voice and be a part of something bigger.
Organize your speakers!

Be prepared and know who’s speaking.
✓ Public speaking takes preparation and practice.
✓ Take advantage of talking points available in the UABB Action Toolkit and the Education Trust Tennessee Coalition Classrooms. Glossary of Effective Language
✓ Work together as a group to have a wide range of speaker perspectives.
   ★ It is a good idea to plan for who may represent the group if they change the rules on how many people may speak. This is happening more often.
✓ Take time to write up your remarks, practice them out loud, and time yourself. Take a break and come back to it. Have a friend listen to your comments. It usually takes longer to read and make your statement than you realize. Practice also builds confidence.
✓ Have a printed copy of your remarks to take with you, try not to only rely on your phone or tablet to read from. WiFi may be spotty, your battery might die, any number of things can happen and you might lose your notes!
✓ Gather a crew of supporters to be there so you aren’t alone. Consider wearing the same color, sitting in a group, or find some other creative way to show the solidarity of library advocates in the room.
✓ Designate someone(s) to record the meeting with video/audio. Some public meetings are not streamed or recorded and the only record of the meeting was in the minutes. Usually the recorded minutes are very limited. Bring a portable battery to charge your device. Consider the way you’re recording videos to prevent the file from being too large. Know in advance how you can share the video, there are different apps you can use too.
✓ Show up early and make sure you are on the list. The public comment period may be rearranged from the original agenda if there are a lot of speakers, or if they want to get the item off the agenda first.

Know the Material!

If there is a specific book, do your research on it and why it is being challenged. Understanding why a book is being challenged is critical to speaking in its defense. As you make a plan to attend and speak at the meeting:
✓ Visit the United Against Book Bans Resume page to read a synopsis of the book, its age recommendations, awards, reviews, media, and updates on specific challenges for the book https://bookresumes.uniteagainstbookbans.org/
✓ Read the book that is being challenged.
✓ Understand the specifics about the book that make it a target. If you are interested in reading the reviews and descriptions the censorship activists are using to argue about the books, you can visit the booklooks.org website. *Beware of harmful language and hateful terminology.
✓ Research instances where the book has been challenged in other communities and the outcomes of those challenges. Go back to https://bookresumes.uniteagainstbookbans.org/
✓ Check out socials and videos of related meetings or activists speaking on the topic.
Public Meetings

It’s Go Time!

✓ Arrive early and have your speaker notes ready!
✓ Check in to make sure you are on the agenda during the comment period.
✓ Take a deep breath. Remember, this is streamed and recorded. No yelling, threatening, or offensive language or name calling!
✓ Introduce yourself and mention any ties to your community.
✓ Specify the topic and discuss why you are there. Is it a book ban, library selection or retention policy, or to voice your support for librarians and public libraries?
✓ Make the topic personal and wherever possible use “I” statements. For example, why does it matter to you? Does this issue affect your students, children, yourself, your community?
✓ Connect your story when you ask the board/committee/council to reject proposed censorship and to uphold the First Amendment.
✓ Thank the officials for listening to your comments and considering your request.
✓ Stick around for the rest of the meeting. Take pictures! This is also a great opportunity to grow your network and bring organizers together!

Prepare for the next meeting!

Rest a minute and reset. All your planning and preparations made the experience smooth. Debrief with your crew, adjust as necessary, check the calendar, and make plans. Stay connected with your network and be consistent with your attendance. Onward!

___


Wilson County

Pop. 157,153
24 Public Schools
3 Public Libraries

Wilson County Schools ensures an environment in which every student develops high personal expectations, knowledge, and skills necessary to be successful today and in the future.

The Challenge

Wilson County Schools began receiving multiple book removal requests by censorship activists and community members, starting almost immediately after the April passage of the Age Appropriate Materials Act of 2022. The Wilson County Book Review Committee was created in March 2022 as the mechanism to review the books in school libraries and to make one of the following recommendations to the Wilson County School Board: retain as shelved, remove, or move to the Mature Reading List. The Mature Reader List books are still in circulation, but can only be checked out by student's with written parent permission. Although the Book Committee reviews are submitted to the Wilson County School Board, they have not always adopted the recommendation of the committee and several of them occurred without notice, in private, and had no official notes recorded. In January 2023, a Wilson County resident filed a lawsuit against Wilson County Schools for violating Tennessee’s Open Meetings laws, but it was dismissed in Federal Court.

The topic of book review requests and recommendations, for or against, have become a consuming topic at Wilson County School Board meetings. The time burden led to an October 2023 Editorial Opinion by The Chronicle of Mt. Juliet, the local news serving Wilson County. Editors complained that 25% of the entire Board meeting had been occupied with public comments and debate on the book review topic in 2023.

Like everywhere else across the state, it is impossible to separate the scrutiny and fear of LGBTQ+ themed topics in books with the queer students in classrooms. One vocal Member who supports book banning also proposed a Wilson County Schools policy that would require teachers to out trans students to their parents. He also routinely refers to transgender and non-binary identities as a form of mental illness, a stigmatizing attack on these youths. Under the guise of parental rights, this same Board member testified in a March 2024 Tennessee House committee in support of a bill that would also require schools to out kids to their parents. Wilson County’s own Tennessee House Representative, Susan Lynn, has been a legislative promoter of restricting First Amendment Rights of students’ access to books and materials in classrooms and school libraries, including criminalizing book sellers and book distributors. In local and state government, Wilson County advocates are facing battles at every corner. Grassroots organizers are working locally and routinely post on the Wilson County Debate and Advocate Facebook page about all matters impacting public schools.
Position Statement on the Censorship of Books in School Libraries in Tennessee

The Tennessee Association of School Librarians (TASL), Tennessee Library Association (TLA), and Friends of the Tennessee Libraries (FoTL) jointly express our strong beliefs in the freedom to read and unfettered access to information, as protected by our First Amendment rights. We oppose censorship within school libraries on the grounds that it is unconstitutional and contrary to the professional ethics of librarianship, and challenge and removal processes are already in place at the local school district level.

As the Library Bill of Rights states,

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

School districts already have reconsideration policies for textbooks and materials. Concerns about library materials should be first discussed with the school librarian; many concerns can be addressed and resolved informally. If no resolution is reached, one may consult the school's reconsideration policy and submit a formal request for reconsideration. If there is still concern after those steps are taken, the district school board's procedures for requesting materials reconsideration should be followed.

Every book is not for every reader but every child should have access to books they may want to read. School librarians strive to know learners and assist them in finding books that fit their needs and interests. Ready access to a wide variety of reading materials increases the chances that learners will become readers and choose to read.

A parent/guardian has the right to determine what’s best for their child and only their child. Therefore, the reconsideration processes already in place should be strictly followed.

- The executive boards of the Tennessee Library Association, Tennessee Association of School Librarians, Tennessee Library Ecosystem Coalition, and Friends of Tennessee Libraries have voted to support this position statement.

October 21, 2021.
Wilson County Interview

Lindsey Wright, MLIS (she/her), is a published professional librarian with 20 years of experience in Tennessee public libraries. She served as an instructor of library sciences in higher education but chose to leave the profession in 2021 because of the shift in culture around libraries. Her background in politics as a leader in the Wilson County Democratic Party has been a critical asset to find, track, and understand the nuance of policy and politics.

Strategy and People Power

The organizers in Wilson County are a diverse group, made up of parents, former teachers and librarians who primarily organize using social media. The teachers are invaluable because they can read through the policies and understand what they mean. They also work with Erin Moore, Chair for the Wilson County committee of the Tennessee Equality Project Chair.

How are you organizing, increasing capacity, and sustaining involvement?

- Facebook and personal network to organize attendance at public meetings.
- Signing up and coordinating speakers and others to increase attendance.
- Sharing information with the Sumner County Right to Read Group. Both counties have been targeted by the same censorship activists.
- Regularly emailing the Wilson County School Board about these issues.
- Email/call and communicate with local and elected officials
- Doing all the media engagement we can through local, state, and major media outlets like MSNBC.
- Actively recruiting candidates who support publicly funded libraries for elections to school board. Now that they are partisan this is much more complicated.

Where do you get news and information about the issues?

- Wilson County School Board.
- Wilson County Public Library.
- Debate and Advocate.
- Defense of Democracy.
- Sumner County Right to Read.
- Local news stations.
- Nashville Scene (weekly), The Tennessean (daily)
- Tennessee Library Association.
- Personal network of librarians and educators
- The Tennessee Star.
What is working?
Filing a public records request gave them the information that, initially, a single parent was filing all the requests for book bans and censorship. Advocates’ persistence has not gone unnoticed, the Wilson County Commission changed the public comment period rules to limit speakers and time limits, and made sign up requirements more restrictive. Increasing awareness of book banning and censorship campaigns has people reconsidering filing reconsideration requests. Civic engagement has gone up considerably because of the awareness in the community.

Lessons Learned and Needed Support.
★ Apathy, finding a way to engage people, and teaching them how to engage in local politics is a challenge when they already have limited capacity.
★ Librarians facing intimidation, fearing for their jobs and politicians making personal and public attacks against librarians and public libraries in general.
★ Organizers need tools to amplify and expand their reach with tools like automated email campaigns.
★ Assistance with recruiting candidates for school board and county commission.

MSNBC interview with Lindsey Wright

We already have some wins!
Acknowledgments

Tennessee Equality Project is grateful for the countless students, educators, librarians, administrators, and free speech organizations who fiercely advocate for intellectual freedom and the public’s right to access information, books, and materials. Library advocates across Tennessee shared their stories, networks, expertise, skills, and organizations to support their growing and seasoned library advocates. These parents, professional librarians, political organizers, business owners, LGBTQ+ individuals, and allies are passionate about youth and students having access to books and other resources that support their identities in public libraries and schools. Thank you to the following individuals for their time, talent, and generosity:

Lukas Banks, PFLAG Columbia President
Michael Coffey, LGBTQ+ Caucus Chair, McMinn County Democrats
Liv Cook, Organizer
Matthew Fee, Rutherford County Library Alliance
Tiffany Fee, Rutherford County Library Alliance
Keri Lambert, Rutherford County Library Alliance
Chase Lindsey, Vice Chair, Anderson County Democrats
Grant and Jasmine Mitchell, Nirvana Comics
Fox Schweiger, Editing
Greg Schweiger, Graphic design
Brian Sullivan, Davidson County Co-Chair Tennessee Equality Project
Alex Sharp, Librarian, Member of Intellectual Freedom Committee, Tennessee Library Association
Lindsey Patrick Wright, Librarian, Wilson County Advocate
Leslie Yost, BoroPride Chair, Tennessee Equality Project
References

Background Information


Anderson County

https://andersoncountytn.gov/

https://clintonpubliclibrary.org/about/support-the-library/

https://www.acs.ac/

Advocacy Groups

Anderson County Democrats www.andersoncountydemocraticparty.com/


Local Policies and Public Comments

Anderson County Library Board Collection Development Policy https://docs.google.com/document/d/14nWDDq0oEjksrQRCqz-el.bgz4Dw8PTZFJ/edit

Anderson County Library Board Meeting (3/27/2023) www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BCC6NADn5g

Anderson County Commission Meeting (2/21/2023) www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye5yK 30Bwc
Print, Digital, and News Coverage


Maury County

https://www.maurycounty-tn.gov/

https://www.mauryk12.org/

www.maurycounty-tn.gov/514/Library-Board

Advocacy Groups


Local Policies and Public Comments


Print, Digital, and News Coverage

References


McMinn County

www.mcminncountytn.gov
www.mcminn.k12.tn.us
https://fisherlibrary.org/

Advocacy Groups

McMinn Neighbors, SOCM. www.facebook.com/Mcminnneighbors/
Statewide Organizing for Community EMpowerment (SOCM) SOCM Website www.socm.org/publiceducation
Public School Strong TN: School Board 101 Training https://secure.everyaction.com/2Bs4oVehAkaILpjA04lIFQ2 #PublicSchoolStrong
LGBTQ Caucus, McMinn County Democrats www.mcminncountydemocrats.org/lgbtq_caucus

Local Policies and Public Comments


McMinn County Board of Education Library Materials Policy, 4.403. https://tsbanet-my.sharepoint.com/w/g/personal/policy_tsba_net/EYeCYN9yw0hL1j96ebKnm9wBLoZ5xgji3zL8WxNP0rgw7e-r6XCKy


Print, Digital, and News Coverage


Hellerstein, E. (2022, April 15). Banned, burned and critically acclaimed: Global reactions to a Holocaust survival story. Art Spiegelman’s Maus has long been a lightning rod for its provocative design and depiction of history. www.codastory.com/rewriting-history/global-maus-controversies/


Mayshark, J. (2022, Jan.31). The ‘Maus’ that roared. Knoxville’s Nirvana Comics steps up to support a blocked graphic novel, and the world responds. https://compassknox.com/2022/01/31/the-maus-that-roared/?fbclid=IwAR1I6cE0dNeXAmfYFYnmLxr32wyRxrDB6QZURlsOe09h2YXhJxihJNe7I50
References


Rutherford County

https://rutherfordcountyn.gov/

https://rclstn.org/libraryboard/

www.rcschools.net/

City of Murfreesboro

www.murfreesborotn.gov/

www.murfreesborotn.gov/424/City-Council

https://cityschools.net/

Advocacy Groups

Rutherford County Library Alliance rucotnlibraryalliance.org and www.facebook.com/groups/1356785711575638

Fight for the First Petition. To: Library Board, City, and County Officials, Support the Rutherford County Library System www.fightforthefirst.org/petitions/support-the-rutherford-county-library-system

Check Out a Banned Book! www.borobannedbooks.com

Local Policies and Public Comments

References

Murfreesboro Selection of Instructional Materials (Other Than Textbooks) Policy, 4.4001. https://onedrive.live.com/view.aspx?resid=C425CC264269ABEF%2181121&authkey=!AAkeN6mZz6m-b0TE


City of Murfreesboro. ARTICLE III - EXPOSING MINORS TO HARMFUL MATERIALS Ordinance, 23-O-21, Revised to exclude “homosexuality” from ordinance. https://library.municode.com/tn/murfreesboro/ordinances/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=1259992

City of Murfreesboro. 23-O-48, to repeal the Murfreesboro City Code, Chapter 21, Offenses and Miscellaneous Provisions, Article I, Section 2122. https://library.municode.com/tn/murfreesboro/ordinances/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=1259992


Print, Digital, and News Coverage


References


Wilson County

www.wilsoncountytn.gov/
www.wcschools.com/
www.youseemore.com/lebanon-wilson/

Advocacy Groups

Debate and Advocate, Wilson County School Board www.facebook.com/groups/613213027188205

Local Policies and Public Comments


Print, Digital, and News Coverage


References


Appendix A

Example of a Completed Public Records Request Form
Courtesy of Maury County Library Advocate Lukas Banks

PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST FORM

The Tennessee Public Records Act (TPRA) grants Tennessee citizens the right to access open public records that exist at the time of the request. The TPRA does not require records custodians to compile information or create or recreate records that do not exist.

To: Maury County Government

From: [Redacted]

Is the requestor a Tennessee citizen? ☑ Yes □ No

Request: ☑ Inspection (The TPRA does not permit fees or require a written request for inspection only.)

□ Copy/Duplicate

If costs for copies are assessed, the requestor has a right to receive an estimate. Do you wish to waive your right to an estimate and agree to pay copying and duplication costs in an amount not to exceed $______________? If so, initial here: ________

Delivery preference: □ On-Site Pick-Up ☑ Electronic □ USPS First-Class Mail □ Other: ______________

Records Requested:
Provide a detailed description of the record(s) requested, including: (1) type of record; (2) timeframe or dates for the records sought; and (3) subject matter or key words related to the records. Under the TPRA, record requests must be sufficiently detailed to enable a governmental entity to identify the specific records sought. As such, your record request must provide enough detail to enable the records custodian responding to the request to identify the specific records you are seeking.

SEE ATTACHED

Signature of Requester 8/29/2023 Date Submitted

Signature of Public Records Request Coordinator and Date Received
Example Detailed Description of Records Requested
Courtesy of Maury County Library Advocate Lukas Banks

I am writing to submit an open records request for specific information pertaining to the inventory, communications, and documentation involving the Maury County Public Library and the Mt Pleasant Public Library. The requested information falls within the time frame of January 1, 2022, to August 29, 2023. Please provide the following details:

1. A list of all books and titles that have been weeded out from the inventory of both Maury County Public Library and Mt Pleasant Public Library, please also include titles/materials that have been relocated, altered, discarded, removed, banned, placed behind the counter or in other office spaces, cataloged and not cataloged between January 1, 2022, and August 30, 2023.

2. The names of individuals who authorized the weeding out of the aforementioned books, including their positions within the library’s inventory system, and persons which of whom directed these actions.

3. Copies of direct communications, including emails, texts, or other written correspondences, exchanged between County Commissioners, the County Mayor, Library staff, Library Board members, and other elected officials. This includes communications related to matters concerning the LGBT community, such as removal, relocation, alteration, discarding, uncataloging, cataloging, and placement behind desks of books, titles, and other materials. Please include dates for all communications and actions.
Appendix A

Example Detailed Description of Records Requested
Courtesy of Maury County Library Advocate Lukas Banks

4. Redacted copies of all book reconsideration challenges submitted to the Library Board and/or County Commissioners between 1/1/2022 - 8/29/2023

5. All business-related communications exchanged between the Library Board and the library administration, County Mayor, and County Commissioners. These communications should encompass various topics and matters, including updates, proposals, and discussions, about LGBT, the library, books, removal, or relocation, discarding, banning, and discussions about communications via social media and a copy of the Commissions ethic rules and regulations and should be dated from January 1, 2022, to August 30, 2023.

I understand that open records requests are subject to applicable laws and regulations and an allotted window of 10 days for said request. Please provide the requested information in electronic format, if possible, to expedite the process.

If you have any questions or require further clarification regarding this request, please do not hesitate to contact me at [redacted] I appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and look forward to receiving the requested information within the designated time frame.
APPENDIX B

Using Graphic Novels in Libraries and Classrooms


Comic Shop Locator, https://www.comicshoplocator.com/


Visual Language Lab. www.visuallanguagelab.com/papers
APPENDIX C

State of Tennessee, Department of Education Memorandum
Brief guidance and reminders, Age Appropriate Materials Act of 2022
Public Chapter No. 744, Senate Bill No. 2407

MEMORANDUM

Date: August 11, 2022
To: Directors of Schools and Public Charter School Leaders
From: Christy Ballard, General Counsel
Subject: The Age-Appropriate Materials Act of 2022

Chapter 744 of the Public Acts of 2022 (PC744) enacted the Age-Appropriate Materials Act of 2022, which will be codified as Title 49, Chapter 6, Part 38 of the Tennessee Code. In response to questions the department has received about PC 744, this memorandum includes brief guidance and reminders about the new law.

What action is required by PC 744?
Beginning with the 2022-23 school year, each school operated by a local education agency (LEA) and each public charter school shall:
- Maintain a list of materials in the library collection;
- Adopt a policy for developing and reviewing materials in the library collection; and
  - The policy must include procedures to develop, periodically review, and evaluate feedback regarding the library collection to ensure the collection is appropriate for the age and maturity levels of the students who may access the materials, and suitable for, and consistent with, the educational mission of the school;
- Remove materials determined to not meet the criteria listed above.

What materials are included in library collections for purposes of implementing PC 744?
The following definitions are included in PC 744:
- “Library collection” means the materials made available to students by a school operated by an LEA or by a public charter school, but does not include materials made available to students as part of a course curriculum; and
- “Materials” means books, periodicals, newspapers, manuscripts, films, prints, documents, microfilm, discs, cassettes, videotapes, videogames, applications, and subscription content in any form.

Please note that the definition of library collection is broad and is not limited to materials physically located in the school’s library. The definition applies to any materials, regardless of form, made available to students, including materials maintained in a teacher’s classroom.

Who should I contact for questions on implementing PC 744?
Determining if a material included in a library collection is “appropriate for the age and maturity levels of the students who may access the materials,” and “is suitable for, and consistent with, the educational mission of the school,” is a local decision. LEAs and public charter schools should work closely with their local attorneys for specific legal advice on the implementation of the law, including the development and implementation of policies and procedures for the review of materials and feedback received about materials.
APPENDIX D

14 Prohibited Concepts

Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-6-1019, Prohibited Concepts Complaint Form

“If you believe that an LEA or public charter school has included or promoted a prohibited concept in a course of instruction, curriculum, instructional program, or supplemental instructional materials in violation of Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1019(a), please fill out this form, sign it, and send it to the appropriate LEA or public charter school. Please remember that general complaints about the subject matter or age appropriateness of textbooks and instructional materials that do not allege that prohibited concepts are being or have been included or promoted in a course of instruction, curriculum, instructional program, or in supplemental instructional materials of an LEA or public charter school, are not covered by Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1019 and must be filed with the LEA or public charter school pursuant to the LEA or public charter school’s locally adopted policy for addressing such complaints.”

The allegations above fall within the following category or categories of prohibited concepts:

- 1. One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.
- 2. An individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously.
- 3. An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual’s race or sex.
- 4. An individual’s moral character is determined by the individual’s race or sex.
- 5. An individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.
- 6. An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual’s race or sex.
- 7. A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex.
- 8. This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist.
- 9. Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government.
- 10. Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people.
- 11. Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual’s race or sex.
- 12. The rule of law does not exist, but instead is series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups.
- 13. All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- 14. Governments should deny to any person within the government’s jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.

Tennessee Department of Education. Prohibited Concepts Complaint Form available at: https://mcusercontent.com/b28b453ee164f9a2e2b505761/files/bef8fc21-d1a5-d365-8ab9-037d4969a139/Prohibited_Concepts_Complaint_Form.pdf?mc_cid=3e31ca8885&mc_eid=af67bf5ad
Appendix E

Advocacy Resources

Tennessee Advocacy Groups
Chattanooga Moms for Social Justice https://www.facebook.com/MSJChatt/
LGBTQ Caucus, McMinn County Democrats www.mcminncountydemocrats.org/lgbtq_caucus
McMinn Neighbors SOCM www.facebook.com/Mcminnneighbors/
Moms for Social Justice www.momsforsocialjustice.us/
PFLAG Columbia https://pflag.org/chapter/columbia/, www.facebook.com/PflagColumbiaTN
PFLAG Oak Ridge https://pflag.org/chapter/oak-ridge/, www.facebook.com/groups/371268369619360
Right to Read Sumner County www.flowcode.com/page/right2readsumner
Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment (SOCM), https://www.socm.org/
Stop Moms for “Liberty” https://www.stopmomsforliberty.com/
Tennessee Equality Project https://www.tnep.org/
The Equity Alliance https://theequityalliance.org/
Rutherford County Library Alliance rucotnlibraryalliance.org

Government Agencies
Tennessee General Assembly https://www.capitol.tn.gov/
Tennessee Department of Education https://www.tn.gov/education
Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury https://comptroller.tn.gov/
Textbook and Instructional Materials Quality Commission, TN Department of Education https://www.tn.gov/education/
districts/textbook-services/textbook-commission.html

Professional Organizations
American Library Association https://www.al.org/
Association for Library Service to Children https://www.al.org/alsc/
Young Adult Library Services Association https://www.al.org/yalsa/
Tennessee Library Association https://www.tnla.org/
Tennessee Association of School Librarians https://www.tasltn.org/
Tennessee Education Association https://tnea.org/
Public Library Association https://www.al.org/pla/
Appendix E

Nonprofit Organizations

Children's and Young Adults Committee https://pen.org/membership/current-members/childrens-and-young-adult-books

Defense of Democracy https://defenseofdemocracy.org/

EveryLibrary Institute https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/

Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/

Freedom to Read Foundation https://www.ftrf.org/

GLSEN https://www.glsen.org/

Movement Advancement Project https://www.lgbtmap.org/

National Coalition Against Censorship https://ncac.org/

National Council of Teachers of English https://ncte.org/

PFLAG https://pflag.org/

PEN America https://pen.org/

Tennessee Coalition for Open Government https://tcog.info/


United Against Book Bans, Book Resumes https://bookresumes.uniteagainstbookbans.org/

Visual Language Lab https://www.visuallanguagelab.com/

Book Reviews, Lists, and Guides

Book Resumes, United Against Book Bans https://bookresumes.uniteagainstbookbans.org/

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund https://cbldf.org/


Banned Books Access


Knoxville Rainbow Library https://www.librarycat.org/lib/KnoxRainbowLibrary

Rutherford County Book Hotline, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfCm0Wrvh9851F-KGKwwiXoFNHautQs4tyfMy_fl08X0heh2g/viewform

University of Tennessee, Center for Children’s and Young Adult Literature. Young Adult Banned Book Order Form https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfCm0Wrvh9851F-KGKwwiXoFNHautQs4tyfMy_fl08X0heh2g/viewform
Appendix E

Youth Advocates


Young Adult Advocacy Resources. https://www.al.org/yalsa/advocacy

Our Turn, Student and Activist Coalition https://www.itsourturn.org/student_agenda

General Advocacy


Book Resumes, United Against Book Bans. https://bookresumes.uniteagainstbookbans.org/


Education Trust, Tennessee. Tennessee Coalition for Truth in Classrooms. TN Coalition for Truth in Our Classrooms - The Education Trust comprehensive resources and guidance for policies and proposals, legislative tracking, and other resources for students, educators, and advocates from a variety of sources.


Library and Archives, Tennessee Secretary of State. https://sos.tn.gov/tsla

Public Library Trustees, Description, Tennessee Secretary of State. https://sos.tn.gov/tsla/pages/public-library-trustees

Plan to testify at board meetings, PFLAG https://pflag.org/plan-to-testify-at-local-board-meetings/

Appendix E

State Legislative Toolkit from the American Library Association. ALA is available to consult with state organizations seeking assistance with legislative planning, priorities development, training, or guidance regarding specific legislation. Contact advocacy@ala.org. [https://www.ala.org/advocacy/state-legislative-toolkit]

Resources for Libraries and Library Workers, defense against organized efforts at censorship, FAQ's: [https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship/faq]

- ALA Fight Censorship: resources and advice for library workers
- State and Local Resources
- Freedom to Read Foundation (Legal & Financial Assistance)
- LeRoy C. Merritt Humanitarian Fund
- National Coalition Against Censorship Resource Guide
- PEN America Online Harassment Guide
- Pen America Tip Sheet


Reports and Position Statements


Appendix F

Policy and Legislation

Constitutional Rights to Free Speech

United States Constitution, First Amendment: Constitution Annotated, browse the First Amendment https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/amendment-1/

Historical background on the First Amendment, https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-7-1/

ALDE 00013537/#ALDF 00025502


Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University, https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/


Tennessee Public Libraries


- Form: Prohibited Concepts Complaint. https://mcusercontent.com/b28b453e1e164f9a2e2b5057e1/files/bef8fc21-d1a5-d365-8ab9-037d4969a139/Prohibited_Concepts_Complaint_Form.pdf?mc_cid=3e31ca8885&mc_eid=af67b5f5ad
Appendix F

Sunshine Laws, Open Meetings and Public Records Acts

★ Statutes. https://www.ctas.tennessee.edu/node/1153/printable/pdf

Federal

Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University. https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/book-banning/

Miller Test, Obscenity, and Community Standards