Confronting Censorship in Our Schools

A companion guide to "School Boards Matter," focused on protecting inclusive education and resisting censorship at the school board level.





Co-Developed by the

Human Rights Campaign Foundation and

the School Board Integrity Project





Welcome,

Thanks for checking out "Confronting Censorship in Our Schools."

Local school boards are instrumental in shaping what students experience every day in the classroom. Unfortunately, they are currently under the pressure of organized censorship campaigns that are trying to erase diverse voices, silence identies, and limit access to inclusive materials.

More than 7 in 10 Americans oppose book bans in our public schools. Yet across the country we're seeing books pulled from shelves, inclusive policies reversed, and school board meetings dominated by voices that do not represent the majority of the community. These attacks are not random—they're coordinated, well-funded, and moving quickly. The decisions made in your local district this year could determine if the next generation grows up in classrooms that tell the truth about our histories, honor all identities, and prepare students to thrive in a diverse world.

This guide, created by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and the School Board Integrity Project, is here to help you confidently take a stand. Whether you're a parent, educator, student, or ally, we hope you find information and tools you can use to help keep your school safe, welcoming, and inclusive for everyone.

Similar to our first guide, <u>School Boards Matter</u>, this resource builds on the same values of integrity, respect, belonging, and trust. We know from experience that speaking up and getting involved works, so let's all do our part. Together, we can protect the freedom to read, to learn, and to be our complete selves in our schools.

In pride and solidarity,



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PART ONE:

What Censorship Looks Like Today

2025 has proven to be one of the most challenging years yet for intellectual freedom in U.S. schools. Educational spaces once dedicated to exposing students to a rich mosaic of identities and ideas are increasingly under siege. Since 2021, PEN America reports nearly 16,000 documented book bans in public schools—unprecedented suppression reminiscent of the 1950s McCarthy era. In just 2023–2024, there were 10,046 individual ban instances, affecting more than 4,200 titles, with Florida and lowa alone accounting for over 8,000 of these removals.

These bans overwhelmingly target marginalized voices. About 44% of banned books center characters of color, while 39% include LGBTQ+ themes. More than 1,000 banned titles feature LGBTQ+ characters, with over 25% involving transgender or genderqueer representation. Each removed book denies LGBTQ+ students representation and prevents non-LGBTQ+ students from gaining empathy through exposure to different lived experiences. Reading across lines of difference nurtures empathy, belonging, and resilience.

Book bans are part of a broader, coordinated campaign that strategically removes affirming representation and narrows academic discourse. The American Library Association noted that 72% of censorship demands in 2024 came from organized bodies—elected officials, administrators, political coalitions—rather than isolated parents (16%) alone.

KEY TACTICS INCLUDE:

- Targeted bans of books by or about LGBTQ+, BIPOC, or other marginalized authors.
- Restrictions on discussing race, gender, or mental health are often misrepresented as "protecting" children.
- Pressuring educators to remain "neutral" about identity—effectively silencing affirming discourse.

- Targeting GSAs and student-led clubs, stripping vital support systems from vulnerable students.
- Blocking inclusive curricula on belonging, even when research shows such resources improve student outcomes.
- Infusing Christian Nationalist-aligned narratives into school materials while limiting cultural and religious diversity—promoting a single worldview.

These tactics collectively represent a multifront assault on inclusive education. By banning books, stigmatizing collective history, and stripping DEI structures from institutions, censorship campaigns dictate whose identities—and which experiences—are allowed in public schools. For educators, students, and families, this is not just a fight over content, it's a fight over whether schools remain spaces where every student can learn, grow, and belong.





PART TWO:

Understanding the Threat

The Danger of Neutrality, Soft Censorship, and Preemptive Compliance

Some school boards or local governments may not pass policies or laws banning books or curriculum, but they can still **send clear messages to silence school inclusion efforts.** That message might come through in offhand comments at board meetings, formal resolutions, backroom negotiations, or intentionally vague district policies that push legal limitations. Educators are told to avoid "controversial" topics. Books are pulled from shelves. Inclusive lessons and events vanish without explanation.

This is often referred to as **soft censorship.** It usually happens when people feel afraid or pressured. Instead of standing up for students, educators and staff may start avoiding certain materials—not because a law or district policy tells them to, but because they're trying to avoid conflict or retribution.

Soft censorship also happens when school and district leadership **preemptively comply** with proposed policies or state laws before they have taken effect. Out of fear or confusion, some schools change practices or pull materials based on fear, not on actual law. This is especially common when vague or misleading messages come from state or federal leaders, or when misinformation is shared widely through social media and advocacy groups.

We often see this kind of confusion sparked by executive orders, model bills, or ambiguous statements that are not yet law or don't apply locally. **These tactics are often designed to intimidate school districts and leaders into self-censorship.**







Simply put, every state and every school district has its **own legal framework.** This means local policies, procedures, and constitutional protections usually take precedence, and they often block or limit national efforts to censor schools.

There's no such thing as being neutral when students' identities are on the line. Choosing silence can do real damage.

We need to be clear: most schools and districts have no legal obligation to remove or restrict inclusive books, lessons, or classroom materials. Unless a specific state law requires it, limiting or banning these materials is a choice—not a necessity. Preemptive censorship made out of fear of backlash not only undermines student learning and belonging. It can also put the district at risk of violating constitutional and civil rights protections.

UNDERSTANDING THE CENSORSHIP NETWORK

It's important to remember that **most of these efforts don't start locally.** They're driven by national groups with coordinated agendas and messages to influence and undermine public education policy and shut down inclusive learning. Many of these efforts are also tied to advocacy organizations that support school choice policies—often aiming to redirect public tax dollars to private, frequently religious, schools.

THESE NETWORKS:

- Train school board candidates to push a censorship-focused agenda.
- Promote extreme book bans and misinformation about school curriculum.
- Cherry-pick book or lesson content to stir outrage through political theater even when the materials aren't actually in the school library or are only used at higher grade levels.
- Drain time and tax dollars by filing excessive complaints, public record requests, and demands for book or curriculum reviews.
- Use "parents' rights" language to justify removing inclusive materials and limiting other perspectives.

But they don't speak for most families. These tactics usually reflect a small but vocal minority—**not** the broader school district community.







PART THREE:

What School Boards Can Do

School boards are not powerless. In fact, they can—and should—be one of the most important lines of defense against censorship. Even in states where harmful legislation has passed or is being proposed, local boards still have room to lead. They can slow implementation, create protective district policies, and set a tone of safety and inclusion for students and staff.



HERE'S HOW SCHOOL BOARDS CAN ACTIVELY FIGHT CENSORSHIP AND PROTECT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:

Pass And Enforce Protective Policies

- + Adopt resolutions that safeguard inclusive classrooms, books, and curriculum.
- Explicitly affirm the rights of all students and educators, including LGBTQ+,
 BIPOC, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities.
- Align policies with best practices from the American Library Association and other professional organizations.

Set Clear Expectations Centering Safety and Belonging

- Make it explicit that supporting safety, belonging, and the freedom to learn are district priorities.
- Provide professional development for staff on maintaining inclusive classrooms, even in politically challenging climates.

Ground Decisions in Facts, Not Disinformation

- → Take a stand against false narratives driving censorship efforts.
- Make decisions based on credible research, educational standards, and the actual needs of the community.
- Refuse to pre-comply.







Ensure Transparent, Inclusive Decision-Making

- ♣ Invite meaningful public input from diverse families, trusted educators, and the students their policies directly impact.
- ♣ Require clear, fair processes for reviewing challenged materials, including the professional judgment of certified educators and librarians.

Take a Public Stand for Core Values

- ♣ Speak out for trust, integrity, and inclusion, even when it's difficult or when they are in the minority.
- Publicly recognize the value of representation in curriculum and materials.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's 2023 LGBTQ+ Youth Report found that LGBTQ+ youth in schools with supportive staff and inclusive policies reported significantly higher self-esteem and were less than half as likely to be bullied compared to peers in unsupportive environments. Inclusive schools are linked to stronger feelings of safety, greater academic engagement, and deeper connections with peers and teachers. When students see themselves reflected in classroom materials and know their identities are valued, they are more motivated to learn and better equipped to succeed. School boards have both the power and the responsibility to make that possible for every student.





Know Your School Board's Censorship Landscape

Before you can take action, you need a clear picture of your district's current environment. Use the following checklist and worksheets to remain informed about censorship attempts in your district.

Worksheet I: Confronting Censorship Checklist

	ee any of the following taken place or been proposed in your district? eck all that apply and note details/dates)
	LGBTQ+ or other books with diverse perspectives removed from classrooms or libraries.
	Book/curriculum review policies expanded and/or implemented in the district.
	Restrictions on curriculum (e.g., race, gender, mental health, sex ed, SEL).
	Gag rules or "neutrality" requirement placed on educators/staff discussing identity or inclusion
	Removal of welcoming imagery (e.g., pride flags, inclusive posters, etc.).
	School clubs like GSAs targeted, restricted or denied recognition.
	Limitations on library materials (e.g., requiring parental permission to check out certain books, blocking or restricting the online library catalog, or reducing librarian hours/staffing).
	School board members or candidates campaigned on censorship or book bans.
	State-level legislation or mandates pressuring local boards to restrict content.
I 14	you checked 2 or more boxes above:
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Begin documenting incidents, connecting with local allies, and using the action tools in this guide to confront censorship. Your board has the power to stop or even reverse harmful censorship policies.





Worksheet 2: Board Member Tracker

Understanding where each member of your board stands on censorship is essential to effectively addressing these challenges in your district. Use the space below to map out your board and identify potential allies, opponents, and undecided members.

NAME	TERM Start/ End	STANCE ON CENSORSHIP (Support, Oppose, Neutral)	VOTING RECORD ON RELATED POLICIES	OUTREACH Plan

NOTES





Worksheet 3: Censorship Tracker

Staying informed about what's happening in your district is the first step to shaping an effective response. Use the table below to track key details such as upcoming board meeting dates, names of individuals or groups consistently pushing for censorship, books or topics frequently targeted, and notable quotes or talking points used by those promoting restrictions. Recording this information will help you anticipate challenges, identify patterns, and plan your advocacy more effectively.

DATE	ACTION OR INCIDENT	AGENDA ITEM OR POLICY	STATUS	KEY Players	NEXT STEPS

NOTES	





PART FOUR:

Taking Action to Confront Censorship

You don't have to do everything, but you can do **something.** Combating censorship in our public schools is about using your voice, your connections, and your values to protect the freedom to learn.

Worksheet 4: Confronting Censorship

Your Action Checklist

STA	AY INFORMED			
	Monitor school board agendas, policy proposals, and votes.			
	Keep a running list of books, topics, or programs that have been challenged or discussed.			
	Subscribe to your district's newsletter or alerts to receive updates on meetings and policy changes.			
	Follow local journalists, education reporters, or advocacy groups on social media for timely information.			
BUI	LD YOUR NETWORK			
	Connect with parents, students, educators, librarians, and neighbors.			
	Form or join a local coalition dedicated to protecting inclusive education.			
	Host a small gathering or virtual meeting to discuss censorship concerns and share information.			
	Partner with local organizations like youth centers, faith groups, or cultural organizations that support inclusive schools.			
ENG	ENGAGE DECISION-MAKERS			
	Email, call, or meet with school board members to share your perspective.			
	Join district committees like curriculum review or book selection.			
	Send board members research and data on the benefits of inclusive education.			
	Invite decision-makers to community events that showcase student diversity and achievement.			





SHOW UP AND SPEAK OUT

	Attend school board meetings regularly.
	Share your story and values during public comment sessions.
	Bring supportive friends, students, or community members to meetings for visible solidarity.
	Wear or display affirming symbols (like buttons, shirts, or signs) to show public support for inclusive education.
СО	UNTER MISINFORMATION
	Correct false claims using calm, fact-based language.
	Respond to fear-based talking points with examples of the benefits of inclusive education.
	Share trusted resources from groups like the American Library Association, PEN America, and Welcoming Schools.
	Write letters to the editor or op-eds addressing misinformation in local news coverage.
AD	VOCATE FOR STRONG POLICIES
	Support or propose policies that protect diverse books, inclusive curricula, and student clubs like GSAs.
	Work with partners to draft model language for your district to adopt.
	Encourage your board to adopt a Freedom to Read resolution or similar public statement.
	Monitor policy implementation to ensure inclusive commitments are followed in practice.
SH	APE THE FUTURE
	Support school board candidates who share your values.
	Consider running for a seat yourself.
	Volunteer for or donate to campaigns that promote honesty, integrity, and inclusion in education.
	Encourage community members to vote in school board elections and understand what's at stake.





TIP: Remember that you're not starting from scratch. Most school districts already have:

State and district rules for how instructional materials are selected

Knowledge is power! Review what laws and policies are currently on the books to help you chart the best path forward in your advocacy against censorship in your school district.

Trained librarians and licensed media specialists who are required to follow research-based standards and ethical guidelines

- ◆ These highly educated professionals are already working hard to ensure that students have access to age-appropriate, developmentally meaningful content. Your role is to support, protect, and amplify that work.
- ♣ If you have questions about how books make it into our school libraries or what processes they follow, just ask them (politely of course).







Worksheet 5: Build Your Values-Based Anti-Censorship Message

Speaking out against censorship can feel deeply personal and may stir strong emotions—especially when others aren't acting in good faith. This worksheet is designed to help you craft a clear, values-based message rooted in what your community cares about most. If you have the opportunity to address your school board, these exercises will guide you in shaping an anti-censorship message that resonates with board members and your broader community, helping you speak effectively and with confidence.

WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION?	Introduce yourself and describe the direct connection you have to the district (e.g. a parent, an educator, a voter, etc.).
WHAT CENSORSHIP IS HAPPENING?	Describe the censorship issue in the district (e.g. a policy or book ban, a removal of LGBTQ+ books, a response to a school speaker, etc.).
WHY IT MATTERS	What is the impact on students, families, educators, and your community?
WHAT ACTION DO You want to see	What is the action you want to see happen? What is at stake if it doesn't?

TIP: If you are presenting to a school board or state legislature, you will likely only have 2-5 minutes to convey your message. Practice and be concise. Is this your first time speaking at a school board meeting? Review the worksheet on how to prepare to address your board in our School Boards Matter Guide.





PART FIVE:

Organizing a Community Response

Censorship efforts are loud on purpose. They're designed to create fear, isolate advocates, and make inclusive communities feel outnumbered. But the truth is, when we show up together with shared values and a clear purpose, we are stronger, louder, and more effective.

You don't need a big team to make a difference. Most successful community movements start small with just a few people who care enough to take that first step. Whether you're meeting at a coffee shop, on a group text, or around a kitchen table, organizing with others builds energy and resilience.

Here's how to get started:

- **Connect** with people who share your values—parents, caregivers, educators, students, neighbors, faith leaders, or other allies.
- Make a simple plan. Set shared goals, decide who's doing what, and choose one next step to take together.
- **Show up** as a group at school board meetings or public events. It makes a difference when leaders see you're not alone.
- Align your message. Create signs, share talking points, or wear matching shirts to help your message land clearly and respectfully.
- Keep the momentum going. Text after meetings, celebrate wins, and support each other through setbacks.

As we shared in <u>School Boards Matter</u>, this kind of local organizing doesn't just change policy, it builds belonging. It reminds students and staff that they're not alone, and it shows leaders that your values are rooted in community.

Whether it's five people or fifty, your voice matters. When we show up for one another and confront censorship, we build the schools and the communities we all deserve.

TIP: Want more ideas for building a strong team in your community? Our original guide, <u>School Boards Matter</u>, includes helpful steps for forming a team, staying connected, and ensuring no one has to advocate alone.





Worksheet 6: Organizing a Community Response to Censorship

Combating censorship can be a bit more complex than other school board advocacy.

Because these fights often stretch across multiple meetings, media narratives, and policy shifts, they can require collective sustained action. Use this worksheet to help you build a strong, connected coalition, expand your impact and reach, and stay focused over time.

Who's on Your Team?

Look beyond the familiar voices and think creatively about potential partners. Seek out those invested in protecting educational access and students' right to read and learn. Bring together people and organizations who care about protecting the freedom to read and learn.

NAME / GROUP	ROLE (PARENT, TEACHER, ETC.)	HOW THEY Can Help	CONTACT INFO





Key Partners to Consider When Coalition Building:

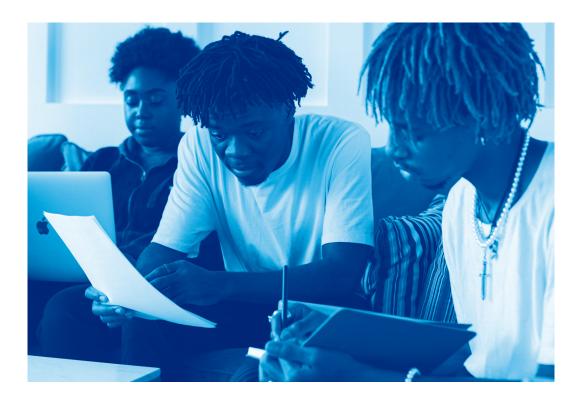
- Educators, students, and families
- School librarians and media specialists
- Authors, artists, and storytellers
- Labor unions and workers
- Local bookstores and libraries
- Allied board members/other electeds
- Faith and community leaders
- Racial justice, LGBTQ+, and disability advocates
- Local reporters and trusted media outlets

Action Planning Checklist

- When is the next action we need to plan for (board meeting, planning meeting, rally, etc)?
- What do we want to achieve with this action?
- What obstacles are we going to face?
- What opportunities do we have to build on?

Reflection and Planning

- What's the story we want to tell about our community?
- Who do we want to tell that story to?
- Who's been missing from past efforts, and how can we invite them in?
- What support and tools do we need to keep showing up?







School Board Advocacy Roadmap

Spot the Warning Signs

Watch for book challenges, coded language, and sudden 'controversies."



Gather Your Allies

Reach out to folks who care such as: students, families, educators, and neigbors.



Show up at meetings. Write a letter. Post online. Use your voice.

Propose Inclusive Policy

Support model policies that protect the freedom to read and learn.







Keep Going

Stay involved. Celebrate wins. Build something lasting.





PART SIX:

Dispelling Myths and Providing Talking Points About Censorship

You may hear a lot of arguments in favor of censorship. Many are based on fear, misinformation, or a misunderstanding of what public education is meant to do. Use this section to ground your responses in values, truth, and a broader perspective:

MYTH REALITY "These books are Books in public schools are **professionally reviewed** and selected by trained educators based on state standards and district policies. Most inappropriate." bans specifically target identity—not content—and erase valuable stories all students can learn from. "We're protecting kids." True protection means helping young people understand the world, not hiding it. Educators and librarians carefully recommend books that are age-appropriate and developmentally suitable, ensuring students encounter ideas and stories in ways that match their learning stage. Erasing differing perspectives, voices, our true history, and authentic stories leaves students feeling invisible, isolated, and ill-prepared to navigate the diverse world around them. "Parents should control Parents usually already have the right to review their child's curriculum what all students and to request reasonable accommodations or opt-outs for specific are taught in public lessons. School districts routinely provide ways for families to preview schools." materials, meet with teachers, and make decisions for their own children. But public schools serve all students, and no single family or group should be able to decide what every student can read, learn, or discuss. We must also trust educators to do the jobs they are trained and licensed to do: teach. Teachers work within curriculum standards developed by subject-matter experts and adopted through public processes. Respecting that professional expertise is part of respecting our public education system and part of ensuring that every student has access to a complete, accurate, and inclusive education. A 2023 ALA report found that **7 in 10 Americans** oppose book bans in "Most people support book bans." public schools and libraries. The loudest voices at school board meetings often represent a vocal minority, not the broader community. We need to find power in the fact that we are the majority when it comes to confronting censorship, even if it doesn't feel like it. Public schools serve all students, and inclusive books ensure ever child "I don't want to waste feels seen and supported. On average, schools spend just \$11 per my tax dollars paying student per year on library materials. Meanwhile, the cost of managing for those books." censorship requests—such as reviewing, removing, or responding to book and curriculum challenges—can be significantly higher, sometimes reaching tens of thousands of dollars in legal and administrative expenses for districts. And if a school is sued for unlawful censorship or discrimination, the cost to taxpayers can increase even more.





MYTH REALITY

"We're just following the law."
Many censorship efforts go far beyond the law, or are based on proposed or misrepresented policies. Self-censoring based on fear or confusion can actually create legal risk.

"These books are too political."

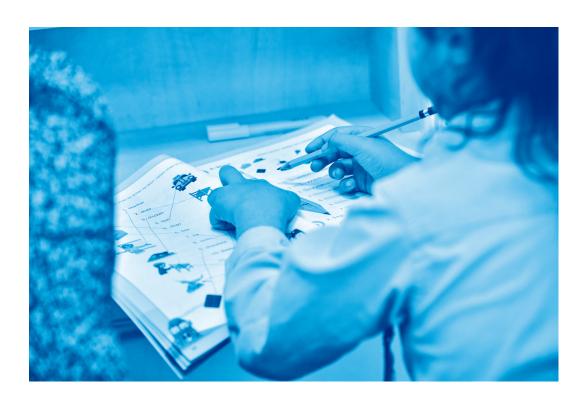
Stories that reflect a diverse range of identities and experiences aren't political; they're honest, real, and often lifesaving. Labeling them as "controversial" is a tactic used to justify censorship and push conformity

to a single viewpoint.

"If students want to read those books, they can do it at home." Not all students have safe or supportive homes. Public schools are meant to be equalizers where every student, no matter their background, can see themselves reflected and respected.

"Book bans reflect local concerns."

Most book ban pushes aren't coming from parents or even community members. They're driven and coordinated by a handful of national groups. In 2024, 72% of school and library censorship attempts came from pressure groups and elected officials. PEN America also found that the same books were banned in 50 or more districts, showing these aren't isolated concerns, but rather they're part of a national agenda.







Recommended Reading: Diverse Books that Empower and Educate



One powerful way to resist censorship is to share stories. Books that reflect a range of experiences help students learn about themselves and each other.

This isn't a complete list, but it's a great place to start. These books are age-appropriate, widely recommended, and often challenged for the very reasons they're needed most.

For Elementary Readers:

https://welcomingschools.org/resources/elementary-booklists

For Secondary Readers:

https://welcomingschools.org/resources/secondary-booklists

For Educators, Caregivers and Advocates:

+ https://welcomingschools.org/resources/educators-caregivers-booklists

Additional HRC Reading Resources:

- National Day of Reading:
 <a href="https://www.hrc.org/campaigns/welcoming-schools-national-day-of-reading-gradient-to-the-block-national-day-of-reading-grade-gradient-to-the-block-national-day-of-reading-grade-
- ♣ Book of the Month: https://welcomingschools.org/resources/book-of-the-month

Reading and sharing stories like these is one way we stand up for inclusive education and actively confront censorship.





Combating Censorship Resources

Below you will find a list of organizations and resources you can use to help inform and support you as you work to confront censorship in your district. Whether it is combating book bans or holding folks accountable during election season, this is a great place to start.

PEN America - Research and resources on book bans and censorship

- https://pen.org/book-bans/book-ban-resources/
 - » https://pen.org/book-bans/5-ways-fight-book-bans/
- https://pen.org/report/cover-to-cover/
- https://pen.org/banned-books-list-2025/
- https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2024/

EveryLibrary - Supports the protection of school and public libraries

- + Fight for the First petition platform
 - » https://www.fightforthefirst.org/

Unite Against Book Bans (American Library Association)

- https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/
- + https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/toolkit/
 - » https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/UABB-Toolkit-8.5x11-02-23-2024-web-version.pdf

Authors Against Book Bans - Voices and stories of those impacted by bans

+ https://www.authorsagainstbookbans.com/

Open Books - Brings LGBTQ+ affirming stories to school libraries

- https://www.openbooks.org/
- + https://www.openbooks.org/books
- + https://www.openbooks.org/the-next-chapter-book-efair

School Board Integrity Project - School Board Election Support

- Candidate Pledge to identify candidates who will support the freedoms to read and learn
 - » https://www.schoolboardintegrityproject.org/sbippledgecandidates
- + Training for candidates running/considering running for school board elections





CLOSING:

Moving Forward Together

The fight against censorship in our schools is about more than defending a single book or lesson—it's about protecting the freedom to learn, the safety of our classrooms, and the dignity of every student. When inclusive materials are removed or silenced, students lose more than stories. They lose affirmation, connection, and the chance to see themselves and their communities reflected in the place they spend most of their days.

The good news is that you are not alone. In every corner of the country, parents, educators, students, and community members are speaking up, showing up, and pushing back. Every letter to a board member, every public comment, every policy proposal, and every election win adds up to real change.

You don't have to do everything. But you can do something—and your voice matters. Whether it's sharing your story at a board meeting, joining a coalition in your district, or simply correcting misinformation when you hear it, each action helps create schools where students feel safe, valued, and free to learn.

Remember: small wins matter. Protecting a single book, defending a single student club, or ensuring one inclusive policy stays in place can make a profound difference in a young person's life. Those victories build momentum, inspire others, and strengthen the movement for inclusive education.

This work isn't a one-time campaign. It's a long-term commitment to the belief that every student deserves to see themselves in the classroom and to learn in an environment grounded in truth, respect, and belonging.

So, take the next step. Attend the next school board meeting. Connect with others who share your values. The movement to protect the freedom to read, to learn, and to be ourselves in school is growing, and you are a part of it. Together, we can make sure every student in every classroom knows they belong.





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