
THESE BOOKS MATTER: A BANNED BOOKS WEEK CELEBRATION

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increase in book banning in public schools, which denies students access to texts. Therefore, it is essential that individuals become advocates against censorship in public school libraries. An educational/advocacy event was held on a university campus as part of the nationwide events highlighting the American Library Association's Banned Books Week. The focus of this event was for participants to read/listen to readings of banned books, learn about the types of books that are banned in K-12 public schools across the country, understand the process (or lack thereof) by which books are typically banned, and discuss ways to advocate against banning books in public school libraries. Each of the six event engagements was thoughtfully designed to engage participants with banned books. Individuals/groups who desire to host their own event for Banned Books Week (or any anti-censorship event) can use this framework to develop their event to advocate against censorship.

Keywords: censorship, literature, banned books, advocacy

Introduction

Access to books is a foundation of the educational system and a democratic society. Books that offer windows to the world or mirrors to oneself can encourage diversity of thought, broaden global perspectives, celebrate unique cultures, and motivate readers to explore. In short, these books matter. However, in recent years there has been an increase in book banning in public schools, which prevents students from accessing them. According to the American Library Association (ALA) (2024), the number of titles targeted for censorship at public school libraries across the United States increased by 11 percent over the previous year.

To effectively advocate against censorship in public schools, awareness and education are essential. Each year since 1982, the ALA has designated one week in the fall as "Banned Books Week" to celebrate books and advocate for their access (American Library Association, 2023). While advocacy is a year-round effort, this week shines a light on the importance of access to books in public school libraries. Libraries, classrooms, schools, and communities host a variety of events to highlight the importance of these books. Events such as these bring awareness and education so that more individuals can become advocates for access to books.

Background

Public schools have an obligation to provide students with access to information. As noted in the Library Bill of Rights, it is the duty of all libraries to provide information presenting all points

of view and materials should not be removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval (American Library Association, 2019). This includes access to books written about a variety of subjects – even subjects that some consider controversial. Titles representing the voices and experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47% of those targeted in censorship attempts in libraries across the country (American Library Association, 2024). Books that contain so-called “controversial” topics can often be the most thought-provoking books to read. However, if these books are successfully banned, students are denied the opportunity to read and reflect upon these texts. This negatively impacts all students because it prevents students from seeing themselves in the books and it prevents students from learning about others from reading the books. As Smolkin and Young (2011) note, “such books are seen as self-affirming mirrors for children of a given culture and as windows into other lives for children outside that given culture” (p. 217). Books become “mirrors” that reflect their own lives (Bishop, 1990). Sometimes those “controversial” texts are the ones that students can relate to the most and removing them also removes the chance for a student to connect with a text. In addition to giving students the opportunity to see themselves in literature, these books become “windows” to new information and identities, inviting readers to deepen their understanding of and appreciation for the diversity that exists in their local and global communities (Bishop, 1990). Books might be the only place where readers meet people who are not like themselves and who, therefore, offer alternative worldviews (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

All children have a right to access books that reflect their own identities and books that open unfamiliar worlds to them (Bishop, 2012). However, books are routinely challenged and banned in public schools throughout the country. According to the National Coalition Against Censorship (2013), “censorship is particularly harmful in the schools because it prevents student with inquiring minds from exploring the world, seeking truth and reason, stretching their intellectual capacities, and becoming critical thinkers” (p. 1). Advocacy events such as those hosted by the ALA during Banned Books Week can engage individuals with books and educate individuals on the importance of these books.

Banned Books Week Celebration Overview

As part of the nationwide events highlighting the ALA’s Banned Books Week, an educational/advocacy event was held on a university campus. The focus of this event, called “These Books Matter: A Banned Books Week Celebration,” was for participants to engage with various aspects of censorship including reading/listening to readings of banned books, learning about the types of books that are banned in K-12 public schools across the country, understanding the process (or lack thereof) by which books are typically banned, and discussing ways to advocate against banning books in public school libraries. A series of “engagements” (i.e., activities, presentations, discussions) were designed so that participants could interact with the topic in a variety of ways. The event lasted approximately three hours, was set up on the lawn in the center of campus, and had approximately 500 participants, including students, faculty, staff, and community members. Each element of the event was thoughtfully designed to engage participants with banned books. Individuals/groups who desire to host their own event for Banned Books Week (or any anti-censorship event) can use this as a framework to develop their own event to advocate against censorship.

Engagement #1: Read-Aloud Video

Prior to the event, a video compilation of banned books being read aloud was created. This video contained readings of full picture books, excerpts from novels, and readings by the actual authors. The readings represented a variety of diverse issues and different genres. For example, the video contained an excerpt of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and the complete book of *And Tango*

Makes Three (Richardson & Parnell, 2007). Further, one portion of the video featured Shel Silverstein reading his poem, “Abigail and the Beautiful Pony” (Silverstein, 1981). The 90-minute video was professionally edited for smooth transitions and proper formatting. At the event, it was played continuously on a big screen so participants could watch as few or as many readings as they preferred. In addition, one university faculty member engaged participants in discussions of the texts as the video played.

Engagement #2: Themed Drinks and Snacks

Rather than provide generic snacks and drinks to participants, these items were carefully chosen to align with books that were highlighted at the event. A university faculty member explained the alignment of the snacks to the books to participants, which sparked further conversation about censorship. By choosing this approach, participants engaged with banned books when choosing what snacks and drinks to enjoy during the event (see Table 1).

Table 1: Alignment of Snacks/Drinks to Banned Books

Snack/Drink	Banned Book
Goldfish Crackers	<i>A Bad Kitty Christmas</i> (Bruei)
Red Hots	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> (Bradbury)
Tangerine Sparkling Water	<i>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</i> (Baldacchino)
Grape Fruit Leather Strips	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (Steinbeck)
Cocktail Rye Bread	<i>Catcher in the Rye</i> (Salinger)
Sweet Tea	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> (Lee)
Apples	<i>The Giving Tree</i> (Silverstein)
Blue Sugar Cookies	<i>All Boys Aren't Blue</i> (Johnson)
Cotton Candy	<i>The Lorax</i> (Seuss)
Water	<i>Maus</i> (Spiegelman)
Gummy Worms	<i>Worm Loves Worm</i> (Austrian)
Chocolate Milk	<i>Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag</i> (Sanders)
Ice Cream	<i>Abigail and the Beautiful Pony</i> (Silverstein)

Engagement #3: Trivia

Prior to the event, an electronic trivia game was created that included questions about banned books. Approximately 250 questions about banned books were compiled into a quiz-like format and displayed on computer monitors. A faculty member discussed the questions and answers with the participants as they attempted to answer the questions (see Table 2).

Table 2: Sample Trivia Questions and Answers

Question	Answer
What classic novel was challenged in 1981 for being “demoralizing inasmuch as it implies that man is little more than an animal”?	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> (Golding)
This famous children's book was banned in America because talking animals were seen to be ungodly.	<i>Charlotte's Web</i> (White)
Identify the banned and challenged book based on the first line: "It was a pleasure to burn."	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> (Bradbury)
This Dr. Seuss book was banned because it offended forestry workers and the logging industry.	<i>The Lorax</i> (Seuss)
Which classic was banned because school districts objected to the use of alcohol in the illustration?	<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> (Crane)
Take a trip down the rabbit hole with this book, which has been banned in the U.S. for perceived drug references.	<i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> (Carroll)
List one reason why the following title was challenged/banned: <i>Drama</i> written and illustrated by Raina Telgemeier	Banned and challenged for including LGBTQIA+ characters and themes

Engagement #4: 1000-Piece Puzzle

Participants were invited to help assemble a 1000-piece puzzle featuring the covers of banned books as the image. As participants worked on finding puzzle pieces and examining the book covers represented in the puzzle, a faculty member engaged them in discussions about the books they saw on the image. Participants collaborated to build the puzzle and engaged in discussions of the various books represented (see Image 1).

Image 1: Banned Books Puzzle



Engagement #5: Posters and Displays

At all areas of the event, posters and other displays provided participants with information on books that have been banned, the process for banning books, the current year's top ten banned books, and advocacy resources. For example, one poster was developed to display ideas for becoming an advocate against censorship. These ideas include posting on social media, attending school board meetings, sharing banned books, and hosting a banned books party.

Engagement #6: Giveaways

Participants were invited to take numerous items in addition to the snacks and drinks available at the event. This was to encourage participants to engage with this information after the event's conclusion.

First, a selection of banned books was provided to participants so they could choose one to keep. Participants were encouraged to read the book and pass it on to someone else and to share the censorship information they had learned. Books such as *Maus*, *The Hate U Give*, *The Hill We Climb*, and *All Boys Aren't Blue* were available for participants to take with them.

Second, banned books themed shirts were designed for the event and handed out to participants. Participants were encouraged to wear their shirts in the future and discuss how to advocate against censorship in public school libraries with anyone who inquired about their shirt.

Third, smaller items such as wooden bookmarks (with banned books messages printed on them), coloring sheets representing banned books, and buttons with the event logo on them were also given to participants.

Fourth, handouts on banned book facts and advocacy resources were provided. These included information on how books are typically banned and what can be done to advocate against censorship in public school libraries.

Summary

Banned Books Week events increase awareness and education so that more individuals can become advocates for access to books in public school libraries. By attending an event that allows for new knowledge and lively discussion, participants can learn about the importance of access to books in public schools. Each of these six opportunities for engagement with banned books gave participants a way to interact with the information presented. This format allowed for a controversial and sometimes intense topic to be presented in an informal but highly informative manner. Through interactive engagements, discussions with faculty members, informative displays, and take-home items, participants immersed themselves in this important and timely topic to encourage them to become advocates against censorship. As challenges to books in public school libraries continues to rise, events such as these can provide the knowledge and strategies needed to increase advocacy efforts to preserve the right to access books.

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