

# 1,100 books purged from public school libraries in Tennessee as districts comply with the reactionary Age-Appropriate Materials Act

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Last week Knox County Schools in Tennessee joined three other school districts in the state at the forefront of compliance with the Age-Appropriate Materials Act (AAMA) and its reactionary book banning provisions. The County published a list of 48 books to be removed from school library shelves.

The list, made available to the public through local news outlets, is an eclectic collection ranging from beloved childhood classics such as *In the Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak and *A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein and high school staples *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, to young adult “romantasy” by Sarah J. Maas.

Knox County is the third-most populous county in Tennessee. Its county seat is Knoxville, the home of the main campus of the University of Tennessee.

Neither the list nor the rationales for why the books are on it have been made public by the school district or the Tennessee General Assembly.

The AAMA Chapter 782 that went into effect last July requires public schools in Tennessee to remove books that contain content depicting nudity, sexual activity or excessive violence from their libraries.

The Tennessee Association of School Librarians (TASL) estimates that at least 1,100 books have been purged from public schools in Tennessee since the General Assembly passed the amendment that provided the criteria for what is considered “suitable for the age and maturity levels” of students that was missing in the 2022 AAMA.

According to a survey of school librarians conducted by TASL in October, there is a great deal of confusion (and no doubt opposition) throughout the state in regard to compliance. Some districts, like Knox County Schools, are pre-emptively removing books before a complaint has been made. In other cases, school board members and district

officials aren’t even reading the books before voting to have them removed. In general, spinelessness and accommodation to the extreme right abound.

Wilson County’s list of nearly 400 banned books is being used by other school systems to purge their libraries. Located just east of Nashville and only the 12th largest district in the state, Wilson County is being used as the model for school leaders to forgo their own review processes and simply pull titles by Dr. Seuss, Judy Blume, Margaret Atwood and Stephen King, among others, from their shelves.

“If Wilson County’s list is being shared around, and district leaders see it as a cheat sheet so that they don’t have to conduct their own reviews, it’s creating an unofficial statewide book ban list,” Lindsey Kimery, a TASL leader, told *Chalkbeat*.

The AAMA Chapter 782 mandates that Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must publish their library collections online and include updated policies for reviewing library materials. These policies must detail a process for handling feedback from students, parents, or school employees.

When feedback is submitted, the school board is required to review the material in question to determine if it aligns with the school’s mission and is suitable for the intended age group. If the material is found to be “inappropriate,” it must be removed from the library collection.

Each of the 93 schools in the Knox County Schools system lists their library collections on their school websites; however, neither the policies for reviewing materials nor details of the stakeholder feedback process can be found on either the district or school websites.

Last April, Knox County Schools formed school library councils as part of an effort to comply with the AAMA. The councils consist of librarians, principals, classroom teachers, counselors and parents. Another committee, the Sensitive

Title Review Committee, will focus on evaluating “sensitive titles” for elementary, middle and high schools.

“Our existing processes, while they have been robust, they have been reactive,” Sarah Searles Knox County Schools’ academic resources supervisor told the Knox County School Board. “They’ve waited for concerns to come in.”

At no point does Searles question the undemocratic nature of the new processes instigated by ultra-right wing groups like Moms for Liberty whose motive is to attack First Amendment freedoms in public schools throughout the country while pushing a school choice agenda.

Tennessee’s AAMA was structured to reduce the likelihood of direct legal conflicts with First Amendment protections by attempting to circumvent prohibitions on viewpoint-based censorship established by landmark cases such as *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982), which determined that public schools could not remove books from libraries simply because they disagreed with the ideas or viewpoints expressed.

By framing restrictions around age-appropriateness and suitability within the school’s educational mission, it shifts the focus from censorship of particular viewpoints to a parent’s right to safeguard their children. In this way, the law aims to align with the legal boundaries defined by the First Amendment while still enabling ferocious censorship in schools.

Additionally, the AAMA attempts to avoid applying the Miller Test by including vague and broad criteria by which to determine what it purports is objectionable.

*Miller v. California* (1973) is a landmark decision by the United States Supreme Court that established a new standard for determining what constitutes obscenity, which is not protected under the First Amendment.

The Miller Test determines whether material is legally obscene using three criteria. First, it considers community standards. Second, the material must depict or describe sexual conduct in a patently offensive way, as specifically defined by state law.

Finally, the material must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value when evaluated as a whole. This provision helps protect controversial works with significant cultural or intellectual merit.

It is this final criterion that will be foundational to anticipated legal challenges to the law.

In August, Penguin Random House, the biggest publisher in the US, and others sued Florida education officials after it passed a similar law to the one in Tennessee. They argued that the law has ignited a wave of book removals in violation of the First Amendment. The lawsuit is ongoing and is likely to influence how book bans are addressed legally.

Book bans in public schools have continued to rise

sharply, according to a recent report from PEN America. Between July and December 2023, over 4,300 books were removed from schools in 23 states, exceeding the total number of bans recorded during the entire previous academic year.

Since mid-2021, PEN America has documented book removals in 42 states, occurring in districts led by both Republican and Democratic administrations. During the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America recorded 10,046 instances of book bans. That’s up from 3,362 in the prior school year.

According to PEN America, censorship often impacts materials dealing with topics such as race, gender and sexuality, targets of ultra-right wing groups and president-elect Trump who attacked transgender rights during his campaign and who oversaw an increase in states passing laws opposing LGBT rights during his first administration.

Under a second Trump administration, there will be increased federal backing for censorship of educational materials. Conservative judicial appointments would likely uphold the AAMA in the face of legal challenges.

The impetus for the effort to ban books comes from extreme right-wing and fascistic organizations. Their claims about “safeguarding children” need to be rejected with contempt, as these are the same outfits that support the slashing of social spending, an end to the right to abortion and policies generally that make life miserable for working class families. Their moral high ground is a smokescreen for deeply reactionary political aims, essentially the effort to illegalize critical and oppositional thought, an extension and expansion of the anti-communist McCarthyism of the 1940s and 1950s. Any work that encourages independent and rebellious thinking, criticizes conformism and patriotism or raises question about America’s supposed “national values” will come under attack. It is only one step from banning books to burning them, as the Nazis did.

The Democratic Party has put up no opposition to these far-right groups, who speak for a tiny fraction of the population. Nor have any of the teachers or education unions.

Though several states, such as California, Illinois, Minnesota, and New Jersey, have passed laws aimed at countering book bans, only a movement of the working class and the reorganization of society along socialist lines will protect the democratic rights of the entire population, including the right to read a book of one’s own choosing!



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