

Florida school district sued for violating first amendment rights with book bans

17 May 2023, *The Guardian*

PEN America, a non-profit US organization that works to protect freedom of speech, along with publishing company Penguin Random House, and individual parents, have filed a lawsuit against a Florida school district for implementing book bans.

The suit argues the removal and restriction of access to books discussing race, racism and LGBTQ+ identities violates the first amendment. It comes after rightwing groups have sought to remove books from libraries and schools in the US – often ones that address issues of racism or sexual identity.

The book ban movement, led by conservative groups – some of whom aren't even currently parents of school children – gained special traction last year, spearheaded by groups like Moms For Liberty and No Left Turn in Education.

In an interview with *the Guardian*, Nadine Farid Johnson, the managing director of PEN America Washington and Free Expression Programs, said Florida's Escambia county school district in particular, was at the heart of the recent book ban movement.

"Looking at the landscape of what is happening and the efforts to restrict and remove these books – it is time now to challenge this for the unconstitutional act that it is," she said.

The district first began banning books by placing them in restricted sections of the district's school libraries and only granting access to students who had parental approval. Some of the books placed in the restricted sections include *Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky.

Other books were flat out banned like *And Tango Makes Three*, a story about two male penguins who created a family together, and *All Boys Aren't Blue*, a memoir about growing up Black and queer in New Jersey written by George M Johnson.

"It's important that these books go back on the shelf so that students can access the books, as is their first amendment right," Johnson said.

"I think the important point here is ensuring students have access to books on a wide range of topics expressing a diversity of viewpoints. It really does implicate a core of public education, which is preparing students to be thoughtful and engaged citizens. And our supreme court has made clear that the government cannot be censoring books just because officials disagree with ideas they contain and that's what's happening here. And that's why we are taking this action."

PEN America began tracking book bans in schools across the country in the 2021-2022 school year. During the first half of the 2022-23 school year, it found 1,477 instances of individual books banned, affecting 874 unique titles.

States with the most book bans are Florida, Texas, Utah, Missouri and South Carolina.

In a statement, PEN America's CEO, Suzanne Nossel, said: "Children in a democracy must not be taught that books are dangerous. The freedom to read is guaranteed by the constitution. In Escambia county, state censors are spiriting books off shelves in a deliberate attempt to silence pluralism and diversity. In a nation built on free speech, this cannot stand. The law demands that the Escambia county school district put removed or restricted books back on library shelves where they belong."

- **Écrire le titre au tableau.**
- **In your own words, explain what this article will be about. Try not to forget any part of the title.**

Florida school district = south of America. Led by a Republican (= conservative) governor, Ron DeSantis. Southern state, less progressive than northern ones.

Sued = a particular school district is being taken to court, one of their decisions is being contested.

First amendment rights = *The First Amendment provides that Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise. It protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

Book bans = censorship, prohibition, this is why the first amendment has been invoked.

- **Read the whole article. Find all the references to censorship (1), to explain how this book ban took place. Then pick out the categories targeted, with some examples (2). Finally, try to list the reasons given by PEN America to lift the ban (3).**

1. Rightwing, conservative groups are at the origin of the ban, in one county particularly. First, the ban was not exactly one, it consisted in setting “controversial” books apart, and asking for the parents’ permission if the children wanted to read them. Then it became an all-out ban. Nearly 1,500 books were concerned in the past school year.

- **Si nécessaire, revenir sur le 2ème paragraphe : “conservative groups – some of whom aren’t even currently parents of school children.” Comment on this sentence.**

The journalist seems to be giving an opinion here. It is a little shocking that people who are not concerned should interfere in these educational matters.

2. Racism and sexual identity are the two major topics concerned by the bans, with books promoting, or at least presenting characters that are not white and heterosexual. The conservatives’ goals seem to have been to put an end to diversity.
3. PEN America mostly used the First Amendment to support its case. They say the ban is unconstitutional and undemocratic, and runs counter to basic educational principles, which are to open the children’s eyes and minds.

- **Writing time: you are an American constituent. You write a letter to your Republican Congressman, Matt Gaetz, who has supported book bans, to tell him how ridiculous this idea is, in your opinion. Try to develop two or three ideas.**

Modèle à projeter si en classe, ou à mettre sur l’ENT si homework :

Dear (Representative/Senator/Congressman or Congresswoman) (Last name)

My name is (your first and last name) and I am a (family member /service provider/advocate/community member) who resides in your district. I have recently heard that you supported restrictions on the types of books available for schoolchildren.

I strongly oppose any House Bill that would ban some books in school libraries. (State why you support or oppose the bill or other issue here. Choose up to three of the strongest points that support your position and state them clearly.) (Include a personal story. Tell your representative why the issue is important to you and how it affects you, your family member and your community.)

I appreciate your help and ask that you please send me a response letting me know if you are able to oppose any future House Bill that would implement book bans.

Sincerely, SIGN YOUR NAME