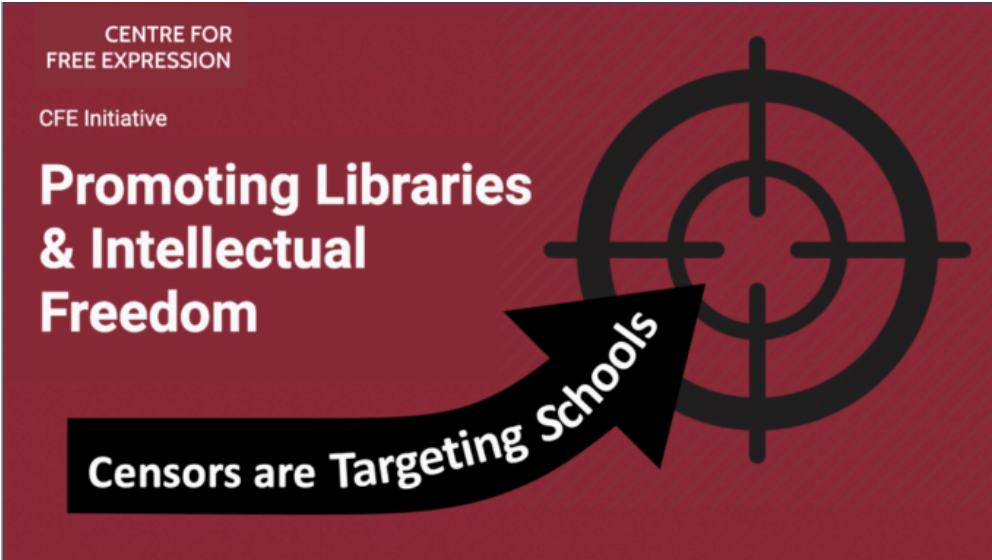


# Censors Are Targeting Schools: Hardly New but Deeply Troubling

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By James L. Turk and Toni Samek

Over the past few years, Canadian public libraries have seen a dramatic upsurge in demands that books be removed from their collections, programs be cancelled, space be denied to certain members of the community, and displays be taken down. It is conventionally thought that much of this upsurge in calls for censorship in Canada has been inspired by what has been happening in the United States where issues of LGBTQ+ and trans rights and the attempts to deal with systemic racism have become key themes for the resurging right.

At the same time, as Ira Wells reminds us in his superb new book, *On Book Banning: Or, How the New Censorship Consensus Trivializes Art and Undermines Democracy*, we are seeing a new censorship consensus with progressives also calling for the removal of books and programs which they see as harmful. Wells notes that “both treat books as sources of contagion and libraries as fields of indoctrination” and “both ignore the cyclical nature of censorship, presuming that the new censorship apparatus won’t eventually come for them.” (Wells, 2025, 26)

The situation has been amplified by social media platforms’ reach, speed, and algorithmic targeting making it easier to bring like-minded people together and giving them the tools to mobilize in unprecedented ways.

Public libraries have been seeing the dramatic results in 2023 and 2024. Groups, many of which were spawned during the pandemic as anti-masking – anti-vaxxers, started putting their newly found tools and tactics to a different purpose: following the lead of their larger and better financed American counterparts, they began demanding the removal of LGBTQ+ positive, sex education, and anti-racist books from public libraries.

The largest of these groups is *Action4Canada*, having started in southern British Columbia and now claiming 99 chapters across Canada. Its signature tool is a bogus “legal” document – the Notice of

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Liability – which is sent by a supporter to their library CEO. The Notice claims [wrongly] that if they have any of the books named in the document within their library, they are engaging in illegal behaviour. The principal claim is that they are violating Canada's Criminal Code provision on child pornography. The notice concludes: "you can be held personally liable, and this NOL may be used as evidence against you in future legal actions. You have been duly advised and I trust you will take the appropriate actions." (Action4Canada, n.d.)

A similar group, which began its life in southern Manitoba, is **Concerned Citizens Canada**. It also has been demanding that public libraries remove LGBTQ+ positive, sex education, and anti-racist books from their collections. It is standard practice for libraries to review the challenged book to see if it meets the requirements of the library's collection policy, as almost all have done since libraries take their policies very seriously in both selecting and deselecting materials and resources for their collections. When the libraries advise the complainants of their findings and that they are retaining the books, representatives of Concerned Citizens Canada have then met with the municipal councils in each of communities covered by the regional library to demand that they defund their library. Two Manitoba municipalities seriously considered doing just that but ultimately did not.

In New Brunswick, the **Miramichi Freedom Warriors**, a similarly minded group, took a different approach as New Brunswick has a provincial public library system with branches in local communities. The Freedom Warriors photocopied the system's Request for Reconsideration of Materials form, a standard library process for individuals to request reconsideration of a book or other resources in the library collection and distributed copies through fundamentalist Christian churches for parishioners to submit book challenges to their local library branch. In a period of about three months in 2023, the New Brunswick Public Library System had more challenges than ever in its history.

At the same time, these and other local organizations mobilized protests in communities across Canada to stop public libraries' popular drag queen storytime readings for children and their parents or guardians. In most cases, the protesters stood outside the library, sometimes yelling at parents and kids entering. There were frequently counterprotests by members of the community who were horrified at what was being attempted. In some cases, the anti-storytime protesters stormed into the library and into the rooms where the event was being held, yelling homophobic epithets at the performers, the parents, and the kids. In these cases, the police had to be called.

Also new was the use of social media to bombard the library with demands that various books be removed and programs cancelled. Some groups turned to online petitions to rally 1,000+ people demanding censorship.

The good news is that it appears as if this upsurge in calls for censorship at public libraries has calmed a bit through 2024 and now into 2025. The bad news is that this is because the groups that helped drive the upsurge in public library challenges are turning their attention increasingly to school libraries and curriculum resources.

It is important to note that demands for censorship in public and school libraries are not new. It has a long history in Canada of which the following are just a few examples of targeted books and authors:

In 1960, school board authorities in Port Credit (ON), now part of Mississauga, removed Evelyn Anthony's highly regarded novel, *Anne Boleyn*, from the school library because they deemed it immoral.

In Hamilton (ON) schools, in 1972, there was an attempt to remove *Sally Go Round the Sun: 300 Songs, Rhymes and Games of Canadian Children*, edited by Edith Fowke, one of Canada's leading folklorists, on the grounds that it contained "bad language."

Margaret Laurence's novel *The Diviners*, which had won the Governor General's Award for English-language fiction two years earlier, was removed in 1976 from the Grade 13 required reading list by the Principal of Lakefield District Secondary School in Lakefield, Ontario, where Laurence lived and wrote. Some parents had complained that one five-page section of the book was immoral — containing passages about sex. Over 4,000 people signed a petition supporting its removal. Amidst the raging controversy, a twelve-person review committee was set up and recommended reinstating the book. In the subsequent school board elections, all the candidates who had opposed the removal were elected, and most all those who supported removal were defeated.

Two years later, *The Diviners* was challenged in Winnipeg. A local church pastor had called for its removal from the Grade 12 curriculum at Grant Park High School, objecting to the same pages as those in Lakefield. The pastor said he was pressing his complaint so parents would become aware of the importance of monitoring what their children were being taught in school.

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In 1981 in both Norfolk and Kent counties in southwestern Ontario, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* was removed from high school reading lists because of "foul language." A year later, there were efforts to have the book removed from the high schools in Etobicoke, Ontario.

The Halton County (ON) Board of Education, in 1984, removed the anthology, *The Story-Makers*, edited by Rudy Wiebe, one of Canada's distinguished authors, because, in their view, it was blasphemous.

Parents on the Toronto Board of Education's Race Relations Committee in 1988 recommended William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* be withdrawn from curriculum use in all Toronto high schools because it contained racial slurs. While it was retained, the school board circulated the parents' concerns to all its teachers.

A parents' rights group (Parents for Quality Education) in 1989 demanded that the school board in Fort Garry, Manitoba remove Canadian author W. D. Valgardson's award-winning novel, *Gentle Sinners* on the grounds that it depicted women as sexual objects and seniors as useless – conveying negative family values to children. The author successfully convinced the school board that the parents had misunderstood the book's intent which was to draw attention to the troubling ways society views women and the elderly.

In 1996, Leon Trotsky's *On Chapters from My Diary* was selected for a reading to be given at Toronto's Harbourfront Reading Series to mark Freedom to Read Week, but the book could not be found in any Canadian public library. When former Conservative cabinet minister Ron Atkey could not find a copy in Canada, he arranged for a portion of the book to be faxed from the New York Public Library. It was later discovered that during the early years of the Cold War, the book appeared on Canada Customs' prohibited list of books which is why there were no copies in Canada.

Barbara Smucker's *Underground to Canada*, recipient of numerous awards, is an historical novel for Grades 5 to 8 describing the underground railway that brought slaves escaping from the American South to Canada during the 1850s and 1860s. It has been challenged actively in both Winnipeg and in Nova Scotia's Tri-County school district because of its use of the N-word. That has been the basis of demands for removal in various school boards across Canada of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and just this year of eminent Canadian author, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*.

A more complete history of demands for censorship in school and public libraries is available from the Canadian Library Challenges Database on the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) website which is available in [English](#) and [French](#). It currently lists over 1,200 challenges – likely only a fraction of the actual number that have occurred. Our goal is to build a more complete list over the coming year.

What we are seeing, however, is that the focus of challenges has narrowed in the past five years – disproportionately to books for children and young adults that are about sex education, that treat LGBTQ+ characters and families in a positive manner, or that address issues of systemic racism in contemporary society. The principal target of those challenges, as we suggested previously, is shifting from public libraries to school libraries and curriculum resources. It is not that that demands for censorship are lessening at public libraries but that they are growing faster in number and intensity in regard to school libraries and curriculum resources.

In many ways, schools are a softer target. Public libraries are typically led by CEOs or Library Directors steeped in and committed to the core library value of intellectual freedom, have a staff of professional librarians and paraprofessionals, and have policies deeply rooted in an understanding that libraries' roles are to serve the entire community and provide access to materials and resources that reflect the diversity in their communities, recognizing some materials may be considered controversial and/or offensive to some individuals and also that selection is not based on anticipated approval or disapproval by an individual but solely on the merits of the item in relation to developing collections for the breadth of their communities.

Schools are in a very different situation. Most schools in Canada, both elementary and secondary, do not have a teacher-librarian, whether full-time or part-time. For those that do, the teacher-librarian often spends a significant part of their day as a classroom teacher. School board level responsibility for administration of the board's school libraries or learning commons is almost never a dedicated job, but just one of many assignments the board administrator has. In short, there is rarely an appropriate infrastructure to deal with challenges to items in the school library or among its curriculum resources – either at the level of the school or the board. Even more rarely is there a teacher-librarian to be brought in and consulted to deal expertly with the matter.

This is not because school board and school officials or teachers and school librarians want this situation but because of years of inadequate provincial funding in which library resources and staff are not made a priority. To the contrary, they often are seen as where cuts can readily be made.

This makes the schools vulnerable to individuals and groups who invoke phraseology such as “age appropriate”, aim to deprofessionalize librarians and educators, and press for removal of a challenged item without a transparent and fair review by those with the necessary education and training.

Teacher-librarians have reason to wonder if they will be protected if they defend intellectual freedom. Unfortunately, the increasingly politicized and polarized context of challenges can foster quiet censorship, for example when a book is not selected even though it meets the selection criteria and there is money in the budget, and shadow banning in which access to an item can just disappear, especially when there is no teacher-librarian involved.

While the situation in schools is deteriorating, we are seeing a much more organized demand for censorship in schools from groups in the community. Some of these groups see censoring material in schools as one part of their broader right-wing populist agenda. Included among these are Action4Canada, Concerned Citizens Canada, [Speak for Ourselves](#), Miramichi Freedom Warriors, and [Regina Civic Awareness and Action Network](#). For others, like [Campaign Life Coalition](#), their interest in censoring material in schools is an offshoot of the organization's conservative Catholic ideology. Still others are harder to classify, such as [Parents United Canada](#) and [Gays Against Grooming Canada](#).

The biggest growth is among groups that those explicitly identifying themselves as standing for “parents rights.” Some are cross-Canada, such as [Parents Rights Coalition of Canada](#) and [Parents as First Educators](#).

Others are provincially focused. These include: [Parents for Choice in Education](#) (Alberta), [Alberta Parents Union](#), [Parental Consent Alberta](#); [Parents Voice](#) (BC); [Don't Delete Parents](#) (NB); [Education Reform for Ontario](#); [Woke Watch Canada](#) (ON); [PEI Parents](#); and [Regroupement des Parents Vigilants du Québec](#).

Still others are locally focused on individual school boards or communities, such as: [Concerned Parents of London & Area](#) (London, ON), [Save Our Schools](#) (Toronto), and a plethora of groups in Durham Region (east of Toronto), including: [ProtectLiteracy.ca](#), [Durham Parents United](#), and [DDSB Concerned Parents](#).

Finally, there are groups with a more single-minded orientation like the [Libertarian Lighthouse Foundation](#) and the fundamentalist Christian organizations that occasionally dabble in school matters like [Liberty Coalition Canada](#) and [Save Canada](#).

Parents rights groups historically have varying lifespans – from those that arise in response to a transient issue and then disappear to others that develop into formidable, long-lasting organizations.

Inadequate funding, resurgent parents rights groups, emboldened ideological groups on the populist right, and a “censorship consensus” crossing political, social, and cultural lines, not to mention what is happening in the United States, mean there is a lot to do in helping K-12 schools in Canada become as effective both in protecting and promoting intellectual freedom as public libraries and in protecting the integrity of Canada's systems of public education. This is a major priority for the Centre for Free Expression. As a start, in 2025, the CFE has created a [Working Group on Schools and Intellectual Freedom](#) made up of leaders of teacher and school librarian organizations as well as academics working in this field to guide its efforts. CFE will be meeting with provincial associations of school boards and of school principals and senior administrative officers as well as with teachers' federations to draw attention to the issue and to engage them in helping find solutions.

**We are preparing resources we hope will be helpful. These include:**

- Educational material on intellectual freedom and its importance for K-12 schools;
- Best practices in dealing with challenges to the content of school libraries and curriculum resources;
- A database of school library selection guidelines and reconsideration procedures to assist boards and schools in identifying and adopting best practices;

CFE Initiative

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- An analysis of international and Canadian law and jurisprudence on children's rights and parents' responsibilities;
- Profiles of groups promoting censorship;
- Educational material on why censorship is an ineffective and often counterproductive means for a democratic society.

**We would like your help.** Let us know of any groups that are promoting censorship in your schools. Add to the Canadian Library Challenges Database the details of challenges to library and curriculum resources in your school or your board. You can easily do it by clicking [here](#) if you prefer English and [here](#) if French. For more information, or if you have questions or comments, please contact us at [cfe@torontomu.ca](mailto:cfe@torontomu.ca) or visit our website ([cfe.torontomu.ca](http://cfe.torontomu.ca)).

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**James L. Turk** is Director of the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) at Toronto Metropolitan University and has led CFE's work in defending and promoting intellectual freedom. He has received numerous awards for his work including the Intellectual Freedom Award for outstanding contributions to intellectual freedom in Canada from the Canadian Federation of Library Associations, the Les Fowlie Intellectual Freedom Award from the Ontario Library Association, and the Milner Memorial Award for significant contributions to the understanding and strengthening of academic freedom in Canada from the Canadian Association of University

Teachers.



**Dr. Toni Samek** is a Professor and former Chair at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, and is one of Canada's leading authorities on intellectual freedom. Her books include: *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship 1967 to 1974*; *Librarianship and Human Rights: A twenty-first century guide*; *She Was a Booklegger: Remembering Celeste West*; *Information Ethics, Globalization and Citizenship: Essays on Ideas to Praxis*; and, *Minds Alive: Libraries and Archives Now*. Toni twice convened the Canadian Library Association's Advisory Committee on Intellectual Freedom and served two consecutive terms on the Canadian Association of University Teachers' Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee. Most recently she served on the Expressive Freedom Advisory Group at the University of Alberta and the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. Dr. Samek is currently serving her sabbatical year as Scholar-in-Residence at the Centre for Free Expression, Toronto Metropolitan University.



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