

BEATING BACK THE BANS

HOW CAN PHILANTHROPY FIGHT THE CENSORSHIP MOVEMENT?

Bad News: A Growing Censorship Movement

Investigative journalism reveals that right-wing philanthropy is funding the censorship movement by funneling cash to so-called “parent groups,” such as Moms for Liberty. Since 2020, right-wing political operatives have sought to take over local school boards by supporting candidates with dark money donations. They won seats in Texas and Florida as well as districts in less conservative states.

Partly because of this, book bans are on the rise. In September 2024, PEN America reported more than 10,000 book ban efforts during the 2023-24 school year, a more than two-fold increase from the previous year. Typically, censorship is targeted at books that feature LGBTQ+ identities and/or books that focus on racial identity or difference.

This censorship surge is not exclusive to conservative communities. The non-profit EveryLibrary found that 1/3rd of book ban attempts were in counties won by President Biden in 2022.

Good News: Organizing Works!

With support from national and state-level non-profits, community-based organizations are at the forefront of a movement to beat back the bans. National organizations conduct research and provide material for mostly unpaid volunteer state and local-level advocates. Community-based organizations then offer training to equip people with skills and resources to resist the well-funded book ban movement. This includes helping people file lawsuits against censorship or run for school committees.

In Penridge, Pennsylvania, parents, students, and alums:

Formed the Ridge Network to fight book ban efforts and censorship of people of color and LGBTQA+ representation in school curricula.

Ridge Network volunteers connected with organizers in other communities, developed social media content, coached parents to run for school boards, and organized a door-knocking campaign.

The Network won 5 seats on the local school board, overturned curricular censorship efforts of the previous school board, and worked with local legal organizations to file a Federal Office of Civil Rights complaint against the school district.

Run entirely on volunteer effort, The Ridge Network won 5 seats on the Penridge School Board, terminated the contract approved by the previous School Board, and then worked with local legal organizations to file a Federal Office of Civil Rights complaint against the school district.

Building Momentum: Recommendations for Philanthropy

Drawing on our scan and our interviews, we recommend that grantmakers:

1

Fund organizations that raise awareness linked to direct action on the ground, particularly among youth, including:

- Holding events to elevate the conversation about book bans
- Organizing students to reach out to state legislators and/or testify at the state or local level

2

Fund organizations that train school board candidates and organize get-out-the-vote efforts, including:

- Offering workshops for anti-censorship school board candidates
- Supporting school board candidates to push for anti-censorship policy once in office

3

Fund organizations that provide legal advice and action, including:

- Building online spaces that connect grassroots organizers to local legal advocates
- Organizing to send a letter from an anti-censorship legal organization that highlights the legal consequences of proposed book bans
- Filing official federal anti-discrimination claims with the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights and filing Freedom of Information Act requests

Check out our slide presentation on this topic on our [website](#).

*This research, commissioned by the Sillerman Center, was conducted by Dr. Peter Piazza, assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst
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