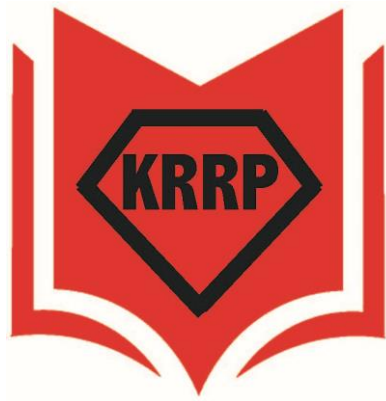


THE KIDS' RIGHT TO READ TOOLKIT

An Action Guide for Students and Parents



Everyone—whether child or adult—has the right to read.

For over 40 years, the National Coalition Against Censorship has been defending that right.

Every year, there are dozens of campaigns to remove books from American schools and libraries. Children's books like *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* and widely celebrated classics like Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* have all been challenged or banned in the recent past.

This toolkit is intended to guide students and parents facing book censorship. It provides an overview of common motivations behind book challenges and suggests strategies to counter them.

Censorship can happen in any community but each case is unique. You may need to adapt these ideas to fit your specific situation.



I. CENSORSHIP AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT



Censorship is...

The suppression of words, images or ideas deemed to be objectionable by those with the power to ban them.

A censor is an official who examines literature, movies, or other forms of creative expression and removes or bans anything they consider 'unsuitable.'

Does the law protect us from censorship?

The First Amendment protects against government restrictions on or interference with the content of speech because of disagreement with its viewpoint. This includes speech in public schools.

Note: The First Amendment does not protect students in private schools. However, the mission of any school is to provide a comprehensive education and prepare future citizens. That mission cannot be achieved without allowing students to encounter a diversity of ideas. Hence free access to ideas is just as important in private schools as it is in public ones.

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

How can censorship occur in public schools?

Schools can limit speech or expressive activity that disrupts school functions, promotes illegal drug use, or is sexually vulgar. Schools may also impose reasonable constraints on student speech in a school-sponsored publication, such as the school newspaper.

When it comes to calls for the removal of books that have been selected by professional educators for inclusion in the library and curriculum, schools need to follow established policies in considering the challenge. **Any removal or prohibited access to a book based on some individual's disagreement with its political, religious or moral viewpoint is a form of censorship.**

Can private individuals censor speech?

While the decision to remove a book is made by educators and school administrators, private groups and individuals can be very effective at mounting public pressure on school officials to suppress material they find objectionable.

What if the book contains ideas that make me uncomfortable?

Not everyone will like every book in the library or classroom. That's perfectly fine. Parents can guide their own children in their reading choices, as well as request alternative assignments in class. But content-based objections that lead to the complete removal or restricted access to the offending material for all students, privilege the view of one person who disfavors the book and infringe upon *everyone's* First Amendment right to read.

Is it still censorship if the book is available elsewhere?

Yes. Even if the book is available in other libraries and bookstores, public institutions like schools have no right to limit the right to access it without a legitimate educational or safety reason.



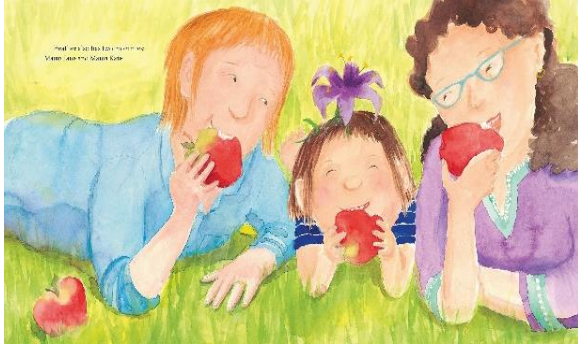
Censorship suppresses innovation and imagination.

For more information, check out NCAC's resource guide on [The First Amendment in Schools](#) (available at www.ncac.org/resources).

II. COMMON TYPES OF OBJECTIONS TO BOOKS

When people challenge books in schools or libraries, they claim it is to “protect” children. Most often the material they want to suppress discusses topics they believe young people are too immature to comprehend, will lead them to imitate types of behavior their parents disapprove of, or introduce them to ideas that would make them question their parents’ views and beliefs.

Sex and Sexuality



***Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman portrays the life of a child in an LGBTQ family. The Lambda Literary Award finalist faced homophobic attacks in 2008.**

A responsible education helps us understand physical development and sexuality as part of the human condition, yet the most commonly opposed books are those containing references to sex or sexual health. Despite framing these important concepts in narratives and experiences that kids can understand, children’s books like *It’s Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris and *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman face demands for removal for their frank discussion about sexual health or focus on LGBTQ issues.

Literary classics like Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* have also been challenged by parents and school boards who deem certain sexual passages inappropriate for young people without appreciating their contextual significance and the value of the book as a whole.



Advocacy Tip #1:

In addition to fostering respect for our bodies and those of others, books on sex and sexuality are First Amendment-protected speech, unless they are obscene. To be obscene, a book would have to be “patently offensive,” “appeal to the prurient interest,” and, most critically, “lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” Books selected by trained educators are, by definition, selected for their serious educational value to that particular age group. It is extremely unlikely that the books they choose will be patently obscene.

Profanity

Books containing strong or dark language are often challenged, even though profanity is often used in literature to convey social or historical context, local dialect, or simply to better depict reactions to real-life situations. Many opponents of these books forget or ignore the fact that masterworks like *Of Mice and Men*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, both containing profane language, are also praised for their elegant prose and poignant depictions of the Great Depression and World War II era struggles.



Political Views

Book challenges in response to political content can reveal ideological divisions within our communities, even within our homes. Tolerating these diverse political views can be uncomfortable, but it is an essential part of any democracy that upholds freedom of speech. It is important that school curricula reflect a broad spectrum of social and political views and experiences. Even if the political views shared in a book don't align with our own views, they may reflect those of others in our community and are worth reading and understanding.



Advocacy Tip #2: The Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that:

(L)ocal school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to 'prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.'

Island Trees School District v. Pico, 457 U.S. 853 (1982)

Race

Books containing racial violence, offensive epithets or historical truths about injustice regularly come under fire. Racial sensitivity and trauma are often cited in challenges to classic literary works like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Such works may make some people uncomfortable—particularly those who identify with racial groups that have been subjected to unjust treatment. But vital lessons about civil and human rights can be drawn from texts that examine the historical realities of racism. Teachers and librarians are best trained to contextualize racially-sensitive material and guide students to a more meaningful understanding of humanity.

The benefits of reading literature written from diverse perspectives extend beyond the classroom, enriching society. Reading literature is one of the few ways young people can try to understand someone else's life experience as they explore a character's thoughts and actions. This helps them understand situations from different points of view. Not only does reading help them empathize with others, it also helps them learn about themselves.



According to the ALA, Sherman Alexie was the most banned author in 2015.

In 2010, dozens of books taught in a Mexican-American Studies program were banned from Arizona public schools.

Violence

Objections to violent content are often based on the idea that it disturbs readers by trivializing violence or desensitizes them to its effects. Books challenged on this ground include *One Fat Summer* by Robert Lypsyte and *Native Son* by Richard Wright. These objections typically disregard the most experienced and child-friendly safeguard in the classroom – teachers. Both teachers and librarians are trained to contextualize themes of violence in their lesson plans in a way that emphasizes – rather than trivializes – the social harms and root causes of violence.



Advocacy Tip #3: Sometimes, book opponents are not interested in removing the book entirely but only from their own children’s hands. In such instances, challengers might be amenable to keeping the book on an alternative reading list.

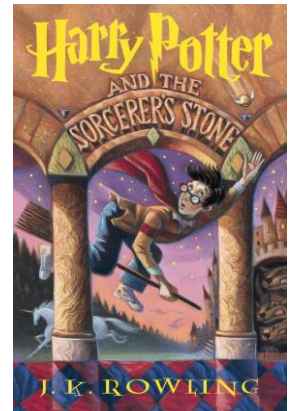
Check whether your school district’s policies on instructional materials allow for alternative assignments.

Religious Views

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

The Constitution protects everyone’s right to exercise their own religious beliefs, free from government interference; this is guaranteed in the First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause. Further, the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause prohibits government institutions like public schools from favoring or disfavoring religion and any particular religious practices.

Nevertheless, religious beliefs continue to be wrongly cited as grounds for censoring books; parents and religious leaders often object to works that discuss sex, evolution, witchcraft, or occult themes. J.K. Rowling’s wildly popular *Harry Potter* series, for example, has been challenged in schools in Michigan, California, and Georgia.



Advocacy Tip #4: The Establishment Clause does not prohibit schools from teaching *about* religion and the Free Exercise Clause does not allow schools to remove books based on religious objections. Students have a right to express their beliefs – religious or otherwise – so long as they don’t disrupt the educational program.

III. THE UNDERLYING CONCERNS



In 2015, most frequent book challengers were parents (40%) and library patrons (27%).

Parental Anxiety

Many book challenges are motivated by an underlying fear that kids exposed to certain ideas at too early a stage will be negatively influenced by them because they lack the capacity to understand their content.

These fears are often irrational or overblown. In reality, the classroom is generally the best environment for children to be exposed to new ideas and, under the guidance of trained educators, develop the maturity required to contend with different styles of expression. In the age of the Internet and social media, the protective urge to shield children from truths may do more harm than good if it fails to adequately prepare them for life beyond the schoolyard.

Parental anxiety over the books kids read is also motivated by intolerance for diverse viewpoints, though challengers are unwilling to state these motives. According to the American Library Association, books by authors of color or including non-white or straight main characters are disproportionately challenged and banned in American public schools. Sherman Alexie and Ralph Ellison - *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *Invisible Man* – are examples of authors whose books are routinely challenged.

Age and Maturity Levels

Even the staunchest supporters of free speech appreciate the tension that exists between the right to parent and the right of young people to read freely – particularly as pertains to very young, pre-adolescent children. To ease this tension while promoting the readership rights of children, organizations like the American Library Association, National Council of Teachers of English, and the American Association of School Librarians have devised guides for parents and educators that incorporate educational standards on age and maturity in book recommendations. For more information, visit the links listed on **page 17**.

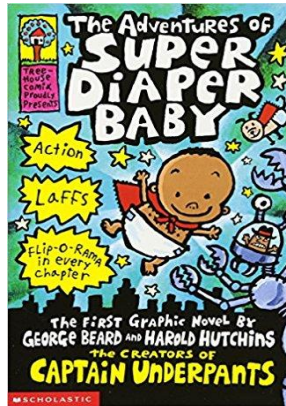


Advocacy Tip #5: If you're unsure whether a book contains concepts that are too complex for your child to process, consult with a librarian or your child's teacher. Librarians and teachers are trained to balance your child's emotional maturity and psychological development against the pedagogical value of the book.

Kirkus Book Reviews [www.kirkusreviews.com] and Student Library Journal [www.slj.org] also offer reliable age recommendations for books and are highly regarded for their unbiased critical reviews.

Selective Reading

While the motivation behind book challenges is generally rooted in parental anxiety, challenges are often fueled by selective reading. Complaints are often premised on passages read out of context, ignoring the literary and educational value of the book as a whole. Book challenges founded on decontextualized passages only support the importance of reading *more*, not less.



Worse than decontextualized passages are imagined passages: In 2011, a parent filed a complaint with a Texas elementary school requesting that *The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby* be removed from the library because she claimed it contained the phrase ‘poo-poo head.’ After the book was removed, it was discovered that the phrase does not appear anywhere in the book.

On Red Flags and Permission Slips

Some school districts seek to avoid book controversies by flagging books with “mature” content. While well-intentioned, book rating systems and parental permits based on the presence of certain content (e.g., sex, violence, profanity) are not advised because they:

- Do not provide meaningful information about the books’ literary and educational value;
- Often misleadingly reduce complex literary works to a few isolated elements that some individuals may find objectionable, rather than evaluating the work as a whole;
- Necessarily give a biased perspective, casting a negative light on the listed books regardless of their literary worth, and stoking alarm over their content;
- Emphasize the views of the small minority of people who object to the books’ contents—often for personal or ideological reasons—rather than the thousands who have read, taught, enjoyed, and experienced growth from the book.

Schools can respect parents’ right to information by consistently providing information on *all* of the books to be read, not just those with content presumed to be controversial.



Advocacy Tip#6: Instead of labeling books with a scarlet letter, school boards should encourage teachers to explain to parents how and why they select certain materials. Focusing on the educational criteria for curricular selections would provide a meaningful, sound, and defensible way to evaluate books.

IV. WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO

IMAGINE...

On the first day of school, a religious leader has requested the removal of Plato's *Republic* because it is "un-Christian."¹

HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND?

① Read!



Have *you* read the book? If you can, you should.

Most challenges that cite controversial passages in a book do so out of context. Reframing the passage in its broader intended context can help illustrate how misleading it is to represent a book by a few decontextualized passages.



Read what influential publications and individuals have said about the book. What awards has the book received? Have any prominent experts (i.e. educators, literary critics) reviewed the book?



Advocacy Tip #7:

Check out the following trusted sources for book reviews:

Booklist Online (American Library Association): www.booklistonline.com

School Library Journal: <http://www.slj.com/category/reviews/books/>

Kirkus Reviews: www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/

The Book Report Network: www.kidsreads.com and www.teenreads.com

② Learn!

Gather the relevant facts about the challenge:



Is the book part of the school curriculum or is it a library/reference book?



Is the challenged book required reading or on an optional list?



Who are the complainants? Parents, teachers, community members, other students, or all of the above?



What is the nature of their objections? (Profanity, violence, sex, etc.)



What remedy do the challengers propose? (Removal, redaction, red-flagging, etc.)

Gather important facts about your school:



Who decides which books get read or taught in your school?



What factors do they consider in selecting books?

¹ Visit the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Students' Right to Read page for examples of statements from would-be censors. (www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoreadguideline)

③ Speak Out!

When books are challenged for their controversial content, the resulting discussion often brings more attention to that specific content and could overshadow the value of the book as a whole. Which is why you should speak up!

Student voices are very influential – particularly when they demonstrate a maturity and understanding of the broader implications of censorship.



At home. Start a conversation at home about the topic at issue. For example, *Beloved* presents a great opportunity to discuss the book's racial themes and share our own thoughts on race. Readers of *Persepolis* can use the story of the main character's maid to spark conversation on social class and inequality.



At school. Organize a lunchtime discussion in your school library about the book challenge and the right to read. Invite other students, teachers, librarians and principal to join in the conversation.



Also, **attend school board meetings** and share your views during the public comments portion.

④ Inform!



Post on Social Media. Start a hashtag trend with the book title and mobilize support for the book by posting messages about its value.

Facebook, Twitter and other interactive social media platforms are great ways to inform the public and attract support.



Advocacy Tip #8:

Authors and publishers are often eager to hear from their readers. Find their contact in the book or through social media and invite them to weigh in!



Start a Petition. Start a school-wide petition to return the book to the curriculum or library. Online petition sites like Change.org offer wide circulation on email and social media.



Call Local Press. Reach out to your local news outlets and ask them to publish a story on the issue. Many local news publications have dedicated reporters who cover public education and student-driven initiatives.

⑤ Write!



To your school. Write a letter to your school principal, superintendent, and school board, telling them why this book should remain in the curriculum or library. Share your personal views about the book, if you've read it, and any reviews by literary critics who have written about the book.



To your community. Design an informational flier or write an open letter to your community and ask to publish it in the student newspaper, school newsletter, or notice boards. Social media is also a great forum for an open letter.

V. SAMPLE LETTER (STUDENTS)

Dear _____,

I am a student at **school name** and I am writing about the recent proposal to pull **book title** by **author name** from the **curriculum/library/summer reading list**. I understand that the book has been challenged because _____.

I believe in the right of all people to read, including and especially children. Banning books we dislike or disagree with deprives others of their freedom to read and form their own opinions.

I have read **book title** and formed my own opinion about the book. I believe it is a valuable book because _____. The book is also widely celebrated and available in many public libraries across the country. **Book title** was awarded the **Book Award Name(s)** in **year**. Include other accolades, if any.

If parents do not want their children to read a particular book, then they are free to request an alternative assignment. But they may not infringe upon the rights of others to read the book or tell other parents what their children may read in school.

School name has a responsibility to prepare its students to succeed in our diverse and complex world; helping students understand and distinguish different views is a key part of that. By removing the book, **school name** is abandoning this responsibility. Removing the book also sends a message to students like me that the views of a few members of our community are more important than the quality of our education.

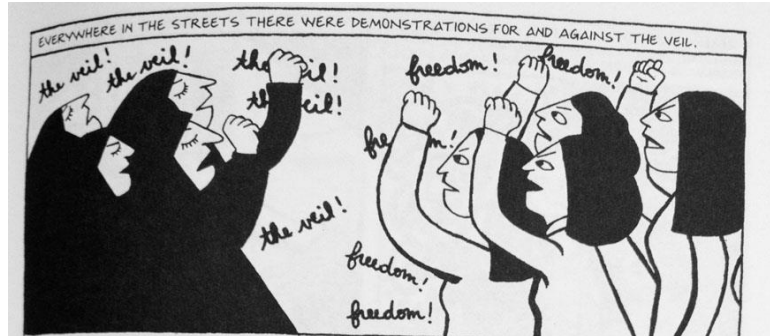
I urge you to prioritize our right to read and think freely by keeping **book title** in our **library/curriculum**. Thank you.

Sincerely,

[**Your name**]

VI. WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

IMAGINE...



On the first day of school, a group of parents has already filed a complaint to remove *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi from the library.

HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND?

① Research!



Reading the book and its critical literary reviews will better prepare you to respond to objections from other parents or community members who take parts of the book out of context by highlighting the literary and educational value of the book. Use the resources offered under **Advocacy Tip #7** to research book reviews.



Reach out to your child's teacher or school librarian if you have questions about the book's pedagogical relevance or importance.



Research your school's policies to learn the official procedure for book selection and ensure that your advocacy efforts conform to them. Most school districts publish their book selection and instruction policies on their websites.



Search online for credible news reports of instances when the book was challenged elsewhere yet retained. Search on NCAC's website for similar challenges to support your position.



Advocacy Tip #9:

In some cases, parents have a right to opt-out of assignments and request alternative assignments for their child. Check whether your school has an alternative assignment policy.

② Speak Out!



Schedule a meeting with your child's teacher, principal, and in the case of library challenges, your school librarian, to discuss the book challenge. Expressing your views on the book and why students should be allowed to read it would help to balance the objecting parents' perspectives, making it more likely for school officials to take an objective decision, rather than pressured one.



Mobilize friends to attend your local school board meetings and express your support for the book during the public comments section, where you and other advocates for the right to read can make your voices heard. Curriculum book challenges are often lodged during school board meetings, which are open to the public.

③ Campaign!



Organize a letter-writing campaign with friends, fellow parents, students, and community members. Write to the school principal, superintendent, and/or school board, urging them to follow a thorough review process to deal with a complaint, and to retain the book. Emphasize the importance of protecting the freedom to read and the educational value of the book as a whole.



Write to your local press to inform them of the situation and invite them to cover the story. Consider writing an opinion editorial or letter to the editor, explaining to your community why the book challenge is unreasonable and why the book should be kept.



In 2015, efforts by parents to remove Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* from a Connecticut 9th grade curriculum were overturned after one parent fought back.



Advocacy Tip #10: Search our site for informative articles on past challenges to the book in question or for challenges based on the same objections (i.e., violence, sex/sexuality, islamophobia, etc.).

④ Publicize!



Post on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Tumblr about the book challenge and why you think the book should be kept. Social media can be an extremely effective advocacy tool, particularly platforms that allow for comprehensive discussion.



Alert your local press. Organize a group of allies to submit opinion letters to your local newspaper, expressing support for the book.



Distribute fliers and any relevant NCAC informational materials available on our website. Feel free to source information from our [First Amendment in Schools](#) guide and our [FAQs](#).

VII. SAMPLE LETTER (PARENTS)

Dear _____,

I am writing to express concern about efforts to remove **book title** from the **curriculum/library at school name**. I understand that the book has been challenged because of objections to _____.

As a parent and advocate of the right of children to read, I believe removing **book title** solely based on these objections would be a terrible disservice to your students. I have read **book title** and I think it is a valuable book for students to read because _____.

I strongly urge you to keep this book in the curriculum at **school name** and to uphold the freedom to read for all students in our community. The Supreme Court has ruled that the right of all children to read books free of viewpoint discrimination is guaranteed by the First Amendment. The views of those seeking removal of the book are not shared by all. The challengers have no right to impose their views on others or demand that the educational program reflect their personal preferences.

If parents do not want their children to read a particular book, then they are free to request an alternative assignment. But they may not infringe upon the rights of others to read the book or to tell other parents what their children may read in school.

Furthermore, removing the book will only teach children to remain silent instead of asking questions for fear of addressing “offensive” or “inappropriate” topics. They will learn that the way to deal with difficult speech is to avoid it, and that fear and ignorance supersede the quest for knowledge. Reading is the safest way for kids to learn about the world in which they are growing up, and doing so in a classroom setting, with guided discussion, will only help them anticipate real-life problems.

I therefore urge you to ensure that **district name** policies are followed and that **book title remains in/is restored to** the **school name course name and/or grade level** curriculum.

Sincerely,

[**Your name**]

VIII. RESOURCES



The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)

Founded in 1974, **NCAC** is an alliance of more than 50 national non-profit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups, united in their support of freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. NCAC works with teachers, educators, writers, artists, and others around the country dealing with censorship debates in their own communities. It educates its members and the public at large about the dangers of censorship, and it advances policies that promote and protect freedom of expression and democratic values. **NCAC's Kids' Right to Read Project (KRRP)**, a key initiative of its Youth Free Expression Program, is a unique advocacy project that works at the grassroots level to protect students' right to read in schools, libraries, and bookstores across the country.



The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

The **NCTE** supports intellectual freedom at all educational levels. An 80,000-member organization devoted to improving the teaching and learning of English and faced with challenges to teaching materials or methods, the NCTE offers support, advice, and resources to teachers and schools faced with challenges to teaching materials or methods. The NCTE has developed a Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines in recognition that English and language arts teachers face daily decisions about teaching materials and methods.



The American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA-OIF)

Established in 1967, the **OIF** is charged with implementing **ALA** policies concerning the concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the Library Bill of Rights, the Association's basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials. The goal of the office is to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries.



The American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE)

ABFE is the bookseller's voice in the fight against censorship. Founded by the American Booksellers Association in 1990, ABFE's mission is to promote and protect the free exchange of ideas, particularly those contained in books, by opposing restrictions on the freedom of speech; issuing statements on significant free expression controversies; participating in legal cases involving First Amendment rights; collaborating with other groups with an interest in free speech; and providing education about the importance of free expression to booksellers, other members of the book industry, politicians, the press, and the public.



Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF)

CBLDF is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comic art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. The CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in furtherance of these goals. The CBLDF assists libraries in challenges to comics and graphic novels by providing letters of support, and access to resources to defend graphic novels when they are challenged.

Share Your Stories With Us!

Hopefully, this toolkit equips you with all the resources you need to defend book challenges in your community – no matter the type. NCAC would love to offer additional support and hear about your experience.

Send us a note at ncac@ncac.org!

Tell us about any book challenges your community is facing and any steps you've taken towards defending the right to read.

We regularly celebrate book defenders on our website. We'd love to interview you!



The Kids' Right to Read Project was co-founded by NCAC and the American Booksellers for Free Expression to offer support, education, and direct advocacy to people facing book challenges. It is supported in part by the Association of American Publishers and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.

This resource guide is currently under development and available in PDF at www.ncac.org. Please share your suggestions with us on how we can improve it at ncac@ncac.org. Thank you!