Michigan Association of School Social Workers
in collaboration with
School Social Work Association of America
Position Paper

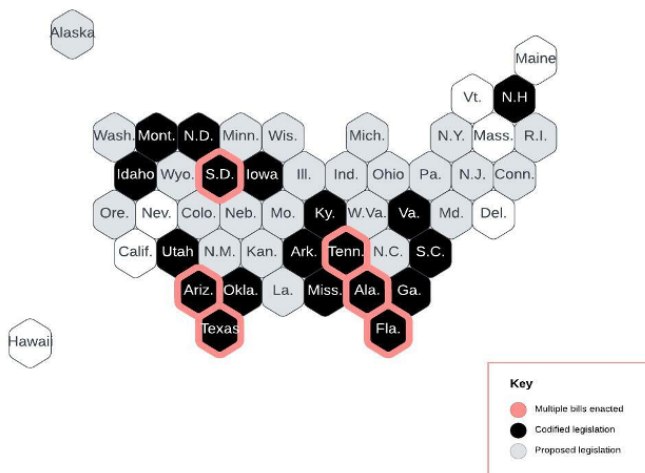## National Overview of Education Censorship

Introduction. Since 2021, legislators have enacted a range of exclusionary policies and imposed curricula constraints. Education censorship is orchestrated by an alliance of network elites on the political Right, including think tanks (e.g., Manhattan Institute; Heritage Foundation), lobbyists (e.g., American Legislative Exchange Council), legislators, media conglomerates (e.g., Fox News), school board advocacy groups (e.g., Moms for Liberty), and political action committees (e.g., 1776 PAC) funded by dark money operatives.[1-2] Education censorship is defined as any constraints on curricula, training, or teaching parameters imposed by legislators or identity-based exclusionary policies. Beginning with race and diversity curricula legislation (anti-Critical Race Theory), censorship has evolved to impact K-12 schools, curricula, and youth rights.[3] This brief spans the scope and prevalence of education censorship – concluding with practice strategies and resources.

Education Censorship Policy Variations: State Influence
- Race/Diversity curriculum censorship and anti-critical race theory legislation – 25 policies enacted between 2021-22 across 19 states [4] (see Figure 1, p. 7)
- Trans youth sports bans – 22 states [5]
- Restrooms, locker rooms, changing rooms restrictions for trans youth – 9 states [6]
- NPR reports state contention relative to social-emotional learning in 25 states [7]
- 474 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in 2023 [6]

Figure 1
Race and Diversity Curricula Censorship

Key
- Multiple bills enacted
- Codified legislation
- Proposed legislation

Corollary Movements: Human Rights Restrictions
- State restrictions on reproductive rights since the recension of Roe v. Wade [8]
- Bans on gender-affirming health care – 20 states, proposed legislation in 9 states [9]
- Voting rights restrictions (e.g., ID laws; disenfranchised voters) [10]
- Anti-union and worker rights recensions [11]
- Drag show bans [12]
- De-professionalization efforts (i.e., lowering credentialing standards; exam removal ASWB) against teachers and school-based mental health professionals [1, 11]
- Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – 7 bills enacted, and 40 bills proposed (higher ed) [13]

Education Censorship: Manufacturing Consent & Sustaining the Movement
- Network elites construct policy agendas and unite organizational influence [1]
- The media manufactures public consent and promotes fear to sustain the movement [21, 22]
- Local-level influence is led by extensions of elite funding networks to create school board contention, book bans, policy restrictions, and resistance to progressive reform [1, 2, 14, 15]
- An example is the 501(c)(4) Moms for Liberty – an advocacy group classified as an extremist organization – linked to Proud Boys, Christian Nationalists, and Right-wing think tanks [16, 17]

What does it all mean for Schools and School Social Work?
1. Censorship and the evolution of censorship topics may promote *fear* [3]
2. Fear may undermine public education in several ways, such as teacher self-censorship [18]
3. Additionally, fear is used to promote a movement away from public education to charter schools and privatized mechanisms such as curricula and educational components
4. The impact on schools is multifaceted, with reports of teachers fired in Georgia (reading a "divisive" book about acceptance, Florida (showing a Disney film), and Tennessee (teaching white privilege) [19, 20]

Practice Recommendations. In consideration of education censorship legislation and ongoing restrictions on youth rights, we must be cognizant of the long-term goals of elite networks on the political Right, including efforts to undermine public education, promote privatization, engender teacher-self censorship, and dismantle progressive education. Several recommendations are provided below: (1) understand the influence of elite networks, (2) address the policy impact, (3) provide reaffirming support, and (4) promote school-wide support.

Understand the influence of elite networks
- Although elite networks have manufactured local-level support for education censorship, this is largely a product of dark money operatives, conservative think tanks, supportive media influence, and the purported guise of local advocacy [1, 2, 14]
- We must separate those shaping censorship (elites) from everyday citizens' perspectives

Address the policy impact
- To address the policy impact, we must begin with an awareness of the scope and prevalence of education censorship – as delineated above
- Recognize how the media reinforces social and political divides through narratives of: "identity politics," "culture wars," and "political polarization"
- Increased advocacy and support for youth – depending on the state, district, and school you reside in – this may look different. For example, support and advocacy at school

board meetings may be needed given the prevalence of book bans, policies, and curricula changes
- Even if you reside in a state seemingly unimpacted by state legislation, arguably all states have been impacted by the scope of elite network influences and media discourse – this means educators may develop forms of classroom self-censorship, and youth may be impacted by negative attitudes, biases, and experiences [18]

Provide Reaffirming Support
- To reaffirm support for youth and educators, school-wide efforts toward equity, inclusion, and relationship-rich environments may be useful
- In response, we must boost our awareness and ability to challenges for youth related to gender identity, trauma-informed practice, equity-based competencies related to race, structural racism, and anti-racism [23]
- As SSW practitioners, we must be confident and capable of delivering equitable practices and supporting educators and administrators in their inclusive-based practices in schools [24]
- Increased advocacy for youth civil rights liberties; and support as needed, including at school board meetings, in the classroom, and in individual meetings with youth

Promote school-wide support
- SSW practitioners can help to support administrators in their understanding of education censorship and youth rights restrictions to help reaffirm support and promote frameworks of inclusivity
- SSW practitioners can understand the challenges educators face in curricula censorship and offer classroom support toward an awareness of curricula bans and anti-LGBTQ trends
- Promoting school-wide support means meeting with youth, understanding their experiences, and learning to advocate from a place of informed understanding
- School-wide support means a deepened emphasis on relationship promotion, united school-mental health support, and amelioration of educational inequities

Conclusion. Elite networks on the political Right have united actors and organizations to enact curricula censorship, which transitioned into a wave of anti-LGBTQ trends that continues today. As elites shape a macro-level policy agenda, media conglomerates, school board advocacy groups, and political action committees continue the agenda on a local level. Collectively, these trends influence schools and school social work practice in myriad ways. Above all, we must re-imagine mechanisms of support and healing for youth amid ongoing themes of oppression. To do this, we can understand the influence of elite networks, address the policy impact, reaffirm support for youth and educators, and promote preventative school-wide practice. The trends of education censorship and restrictions on youth rights provide us with an opportunity to provide value, support, and mechanisms of healing throughout the school. As SSW practitioners, we can become leaders in advocacy, equity, and school-wide support toward justice, healing, and inclusivity.

Additional Resources. To stay apprised of the evolution of education censorship, several resources are offered

Censorship Policies, Book Bans, & Trends of the Political Right
- [Pen America – index of state censorship](#)
- [Pen America – local-level book bans](#)

- [UCLA – anti-CRT tracker](#)
- [National Coalition Against Censorship](#)
- [Network for Public Education](#)

Anti-LGBTQ Trends
- [Movement Advancement Project](#)
- [Human Rights Campaign](#)
- [American Civil Liberties Union](#)

SSWAA is proud to offer a network of professionals and tools to support your practice, such as the above recommendations. Continue to access the SSWAA website, SSWAA professional development opportunities, and SSWAA Board to meet your needs.

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