

TIME

Parents Should Have a Voice in Their Kids' Education But We've Gone Too Far



An even mix of proponents and opponents to teaching Critical Race Theory are in attendance as the Placentia Yorba Linda School Board discusses a proposed resolution to ban it from being taught in schools. November 2021 Robert Gauthier-Los Angeles Times

BY **SUZANNE NOSSEL** SEPTEMBER 20, 2022 3:11 PM EDT
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As kids return to school, the focus on math, science, and **reading** has been sidelined by campaigns mounted in the name of “parents’ rights.” Advocates are demanding that books be banned from curricula and school libraries, targeting teachers and administrators based on viewpoints, and fighting for control of education boards. There is no question that parents deserve a say in shaping their children’s educations; they have moral and legal responsibility for their children, and the freedom to make

fundamental decisions for their families. But the rallying cry of “parents’ rights” is being wielded to do far more than give parents their rightful voice. It is turning public schools into political battlegrounds, fracturing communities, and diverting time and energy away from teaching and learning.

I have two children, a 2022 public school graduate and an incoming high school sophomore. I have opinions on what happens in the classroom and I have made myself heard. When my son was uncomfortable being asked to sing religious songs for an elementary school holiday show, we objected to the music teacher. During Covid, I was alarmed by how much in-person learning my kids were missing and registered my views vociferously with school leaders.

But the current parents’ rights movement goes well beyond the usual channels of dialogue between families and schools—parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, and calls to the principal. The movement is an organized, nationwide effort waged by advocacy groups, including Moms for Liberty, the Parental Rights Foundation, and No Left Turn in Education. Their aim is to activate parents to contest what is taught in the classroom, what books are available to students, and the professional authority of teachers, administrators, and librarians to carry out their work. This campaign goes well beyond a judicious effort to prompt reconsideration of controversial aspects of certain school curricula or questions of the age-appropriateness of certain materials and narratives. Rather, its methods center on censorship and are chilling speech in classrooms across the country.

In Alpine, Utah, in August, 52 books, including Judy Blume’s *Forever* and Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes*, were [pulled from school library shelves](#) after an “internal audit” initiated by the school board determined that they contained “sensitive material” and lacked “literary merit.” After an outcry, the district pulled back slightly, limiting access to the targeted books to students whose parents “opt-in” and making them available to their kids. In Florida, Missouri, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and other states, campaigns have spurred the passage of new laws to limit the availability of books in schools, sometimes under penalty of steep fines for teachers or punishments for librarians. PEN America, the organization I lead, has documented more than 2,500 book removals in the nine months between July 2021 and June 2022 in our [new report](#).

The accelerating pace of book bans across the country might suggest that such measures are popular. But surveys show that upwards of [70% of Americans](#), including both Democrats and Republicans, oppose these bans; a 2022 [Harris poll](#) revealed just 12% of respondents favor banning books on “divisive topics.” In the name of

vindicating their “rights,” parents with special interests are pursuing tactics that the overwhelming majority of parents and citizens reject.

The origins of the parental-rights movement reveal why its new focus on restricting school curricula and reading lists is so distorted and counterproductive. The driving force behind the Parental Rights Foundation, Michael P. Farris, was an architect of the homeschooling movement, advocating for parents who wished to educate their children privately, at home. Homeschooling won adherents in the 1970s and ’80s as court rulings, including in a 1986 Tennessee case in which Farris was an attorney, rejected parents’ efforts to get certain books – including *Macbeth* – removed from the curriculum on the grounds that they offended families’ religious beliefs. When these litigants failed to enlist the support of courts to impose their religious preferences in public school classrooms, Farris and his allies shifted tactics, seeking to be “left alone by the government” to educate their children as they saw fit.

The new efforts of the past year represent a return to Farris’s original approach. In 2007, Farris launched ParentalRights.org, a group that is now at the forefront of mobilizing parents against what its website describes as [“‘expert’ agents of the state,”](#) namely teachers, librarians, and principals. ParentalRights.org’s current President, Will Estrada, has celebrated the movement’s rising influence, saying: [“We’ve been speaking into the void,” whereas now, “suddenly everyone cares about parental rights.”](#)

ParentalRights.org played a key organizing role in passing “Parents’ Bill of Rights” laws in Florida (2021) and Georgia (2022), which impose heavy administrative burdens on teachers, make it easier for individual parents to challenge curricular materials for all students in a school district, and target LGBTQ+ affirming practices. Many similar bills have been proposed in other states, and may well become law next year.

Perhaps more significantly, the parental rights rhetoric championed by Farris has become a staple of some conservative attacks on public education. At a conference of the conservative Moms for Liberty in July, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis spoke about the importance of parents being able to [challenge the books available at schools.](#) The conference included a session on [“Gender Ideology in Our Schools.”](#) A movement that for years styled sought to *prevent* the government from controlling how they educated their own children now seeks to *decree* what entire student bodies and school districts can and cannot learn and read. The rhetoric of parents’ rights has morphed from a movement aimed at constraining the power of government over education to one that is mobilizing politicians and legislatures to extend the heavy hand of the government into the classroom.

PEN America's [most recent report](#) on book bans documented how groups organizing under the banner of parental rights curate and publicize lists of books that they view as "indoctrination," present those lists to district officials, and then administrators remove the challenged books from school shelves. Established processes for reviewing challenged books objectively to determine if concerns are founded are swept aside as books are banned wholesale. The report found that proposed or enacted legislation as well as political pressure from lawmakers played a direct role in over 1100 bans across the country, or at least 40 percent of the bans. Spontaneous, sweeping book bans have become an alarming new norm, in which titles are removed at the slightest sign of complaint from parents or lawmakers.

As stakeholders in the school system and simply as citizens, parents should participate in deciding how schools are run. Their voices deserve to be heard alongside the expert judgment of principals, teachers, and librarians. But to use legislation and mandates to declare certain stories and ideas off-limits violates the compact underpinning public education. Parents who opt for public schools, rather than private academies or homeschooling, are signing up for a system designed to serve entire communities and general interests; they are pooling their resources with other families to raise future generations. It is one thing to believe that parents have the right to forego regular schooling in favor of imparting an individual belief system to children at home; it is quite another to insist that public school curricula and libraries be remade to match those predilections.

These tactics also risk denying and defeating children's own sense of educational and intellectual agency. Efforts by parents to dictate what books their teens read and subjects they study stand in the way of allowing children to develop the autonomy and judgment they will need in adulthood. Schools should breed critical thinking such that no book or lesson has the power to indoctrinate a worldview. A major purpose of a library, a broad curriculum, and of the protection of free speech itself is the notion that exposure to the panoply of available ideas and narratives is what enables us to form and test our own opinions and beliefs.

The same tensions provoking these battles are also roiling society more broadly. Social and generational shifts in thinking about racial justice, sexual orientation, and gender identity have stoked concerns in some quarters about how marriages, families, and society at large may be changing in unrecognizable, irreversible ways. The impulse of parents to shield their children from what seem like alien social forces and values is age-old. The challenge is compounded in an era in which traditional geographic boundaries that demarcated communities are eroded by online platforms that make traditional controls on what children see, hear and know virtually impossible to enforce. Some parents who find themselves raising children in an

information ecosystem run amok have sought to more aggressively police the arenas they can control, training their sights on the public school classroom and library. Self-proclaimed parents' rights organizations play on those fears. They have turned their backs on time-honored modes of dialogue and partnership between parents and schools, stoking the belief that the threats they perceive demand government intrusion. In some communities, frustration over pandemic school closures and learning loss has bred resentment and distrust of administrators and teachers, fueling confrontational approaches. The American Federation of Teachers has reported a precipitous jump in the number of educators quitting their jobs over the last year. Meanwhile, children, who suffered learning loss and mental health challenges during the pandemic, find themselves in school environments wracked by tension, where their own rights and interests are often an afterthought.

In an era of intensifying polarization and fragmentation, public schools are among the few unifying institutions with the potential to help solder together a diverse rising generation of Americans ready and equipped to live together, solve problems and help build a better nation. If parents are worried about the books their children may find in school, they can speak to a teacher or librarian, and—even more importantly—engage with their child about the values and stories they wish to emphasize. The phrase “parents’ rights” may have a nice ring to it, but the agenda now afoot in its name should sound alarms for all those who care about the future of public education.

Correction, September 20: The original version of this story misstated Michael Farris’s role in a 1986 lawsuit. He was an attorney, not the plaintiff.