

BOOK BANNING 101

AUTHOR TOOLKIT



WE ARE LIVING THROUGH A MOMENT OF UNPRECEDENTED CENSORSHIP: THE NUMBER OF BOOK BANS IN THE US HAS INCREASED EXPONENTIALLY SINCE 2022. THIS DISTURBING TREND HAS AFFECTED MANY AUTHORS AND APPEARS LIKELY TO CONTINUE IN THE MONTHS AND YEARS AHEAD.

WHY THIS WAS CREATED

The bans are speeding up. According to PEN America's latest research, the 2023-2024 school year saw 10,046 instances of book bans, compared to 3,362 instances of book bans for the 2022-2023 school year. These bans occurred across 29 states and 220 public school districts, with Florida and Iowa leading the way. Among the books targeted, 44% feature people of color and 39% feature LGBTQ+ characters.

We are passionate about this issue and want to provide an empowering resource for authors who may be affected by it. Having your book banned can be psychologically and emotionally traumatic, as well as professionally damaging.

While book bans have increased at an alarming rate, they have also inspired a remarkable grassroots resistance. We want to help connect authors with the national network of fellow authors, booksellers, and librarians who have seen the impact of book bans firsthand and are organizing and advocating for free speech.

Our Book Banning 101 Toolkit will provide an overview of what is happening alongside practical advice for authors, including tips for media training, suggested legal resources, and case studies that show what it looks like to challenge a book ban.

HOW WAS THIS CREATED?

Many Aevitas authors have been affected by book bans, either directly or indirectly. We have consulted with many of the individuals who are on the front lines over the last two years and tried to build an overall picture of the situation. Here are some people, whose inspiring ideas, stories, and words of advice were integral to the creation of this document.

Jonathan Friedman: the managing director of U.S. free expression and education programs at PEN America. His team started with two people in the early 2020s and had grown to 16 total staff by the time he came to meet with us in March 2024. His TEDx talk, [This Talk May Be Banned in Schools](#), is a fantastic primer on the subject.

Allison K. Hill: the CEO of the American Booksellers Association (ABA), has witnessed the deleterious effects of book bans up close, as well as younger generations' inspiring commitment

to liberal values and free speech. The talk she gave us in Fall 2023 was a catalyst for thinking about what we could do to help.

Skip Dye: SVP & Director, Sales Operations & Library Sales, Library Marketing & Sales, Penguin Random House, spoke to us about the state of censorship and PRH's fight against it, and provided notes on this document.

Philomena Polefrone, Advocacy Associate Manager at the ABA, generously gave us a list of tips which are included below pages 6 and 7.

Maggie Tokuda-Hall: a lead organizer at Authors Against Book Bans (AABA), was generous with her time and invited us to join an AABA meeting.

Cheryl L. Davis: General Counsel for the Authors Guild, provided notes on this document. CEO Mary Rasenberger provided us with additional Authors Guild resources as well.

Will Ames: Portfolio Director of Philanthropy at Emerson Collective, has helped us understand the lawsuits against book bans. Emerson Collective specifically support non-profit bookstores affected by book bans.

Toluse Olorunnipa: Pulitzer Prize-winning author and *Washington Post* reporter experienced first-hand the insidious nature of book bans. That story is included in on pages 12 and 13.

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WHAT IS A BOOK BAN?

A book is banned when a group passes legislation or takes action to make it unavailable in public places such as libraries or schools. So far, bans have rarely applied to retailers, though some affect which titles retailers can display to minors.

Even if a book is not officially banned, access to it can be restricted in other ways, such as a children's book being moved to the adult section.

Despite there being a long history of book banning in the US, the growing movement to censor books in American schools is unique in both its scope and scale and is showing no signs of slowing down. Censors have felt particularly emboldened since President Trump was inaugurated in January 2025 and states such as Florida and Tennessee have seen a dramatic rise in bans. Publishers are fighting back against bans and invoking the 1st Amendment, which technically bars the government from preventing the publication of a book, but those wielding power are still finding ways to restrict access.

Censors are targeting books that portray sexual violence and rape, books about LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, and books that explore race and racism. These books are victims of the larger “culture war” over critical race theory and gender and sexuality.

The majority of US citizens do not agree with book bans, as these [American Library Association](#) and [CBS](#) polls clearly show. But pressure groups have been buoyed by previous successes, are well organized, and do not need broad-based support to enact a ban. Bans frequently occur against the recommendations of review committees, as well as against the wishes of individual students, parents, and community members.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR BOOK IS BANNED

First, call your agent! Your agent is here to support you and may have other authors who have faced this difficult situation. It will also be key to let the publisher of your book know, if they don't already. Being the target of a ban can be a deeply emotional experience, as [this New Yorker essay](#) from Aevitas author Robert Samuels shows. The rest of this document contains advice and resources for authors facing book bans.

NINE THINGS TO DO IF YOUR BOOK IS BANNED

Philomena Polefrone at the ABA offered us the invaluable tips included below.

- Get in touch with/join [Authors Against Book Bans](#), [the Authors Guild](#), and [the National Coalition Against Censorship](#), and [PEN America](#). They have talking points and may be able to send other authors to speak on your behalf.
- Write a letter to the school board explaining: why you wrote the book; why it is important to include the scenes or themes that some people are objecting to; why your book should not be considered “pornography”; and what you hope kids can learn or take away from reading the book.

Skip Dye added that, from PRHs perspective, they would like to join in to support this by strategically thinking about where the letter should also be placed or sent.

- Here’s a sample letter to a Florida school board from JR and Vanessa Ford, the authors of *Calvin*:

Good Afternoon,

We are the authors of Calvin- one of the books taken to task at your recent meeting. I’m writing today to let you know what it feels like to have something that represents your life, your family, your child and your experience, called horrendous and a danger to other children. Calvin is the opposite of that hatred. Calvin is the story of what happens when a child is affirmed and loved by the community that they live in. Calvin thrives and is happy. Isn’t that what we want for our children? Unfortunately, too many of our nations transgender and non-binary students are at risk of bullying, hatred and even worse death, because people like those sitting on this committee do not see them as human and are actively working to “suppress” their existence.

As authors of Calvin, and parents to a transgender child, of one of our goals was to humanize the experience these children go through as they explore who they are in this world and how they want to be seen.

See Calvin. See our child. And then look in the mirror. Imagine parts of your identity being called dangerous or being suppressed. That is not freedom. That is un-American.

The politicizing of our children at the expense of their safety and wellbeing has to stop.

Our hope is that Calvin is able to find his way into the homes of people who need to hear his story, and we are thankful to those who can be there in person today to stand up for not only the books, but the books that represent children in Florida and nationwide who are under attack.

Thank you so much to all here today to stand up for the freedom to read, tell stories and to support our trans and non-binary youth. We see you and thank you.

- Draw attention to the ban on social media. Public pushback can help boards and review committees stand up to the bullying of book ban campaigns. Here are a list of social media handles for local and national organizations to join or reach out to when drawing attention to the ban:

[@right2readnetwork](#) – Right to Read Network

[@freedomtoreadproject](#) – Freedom to Read Project

[@txfreedomread](#) – Texas Freedom to Read

[@letutahread](#) – Let Utah Read

[@freedom_to_read_foundation](#) – Freedom to Read Foundation

[@ftrnevada](#) – Freedom to Read Nevada

[@readfreelyal](#) – Read Freely Alabama

[@banned_books_week](#) – Banned Books Week

[@freedomtoreadsc](#) – Freedom to Read SC

[@uniteagainstbookbans](#) – Unite Against Book Bans

[@letamericaread](#) – Let America Read

[@diversebks4all](#) – Diverse Books for All Coalition

- If you are nearby and feel safe doing so, attend the school board meeting where your book is being discussed and make your case for the book. Seek out sympathetic school board members and engage them directly.

Skip Dye also added that including supportive educators and librarians will often be a good extra means of support as well as readers.

- When addressing the committee or board, consider the language of the “parental complaint” or “request for consideration” form, which can be found on the district website.
- Understand the Miller test, the legal standard used to determine if a work is obscene. Any of the following three criteria can be challenged:
 - Whether a reasonable person applying contemporary community standards would find that the book appeals primarily to “prurient” (sexual) interest; i.e., is the purpose of the book to be sexy;
 - Does the book depict sexual conduct in a “patently offensive” way;
 - Does the book lack serious literary or artistic merit.

- Ask your publisher to include information on your book in the [Book Résumé Project](#) hosted by Unite Against Book Bans. This is a proactive step that will help people defend your book from possible future challenges.
- If you have an appearance canceled, get in touch with another local public library and/or independent bookstore. It is sometimes possible to reschedule an appearance for kids/parents who still want to attend.
- **DO NOT CENSOR YOURSELF** because of the threat of book bans. The worst thing that can happen is a chilling effect that lessens the diversity and expressiveness of literature.

You may also want to consider consulting the Authors Guild and the National Coalition Against Censorship. The ban may be in violation of local laws or regulations, and a legal approach might be the best way to overturn it.

MEDIA TRAINING & MESSAGING TIPS

The following advice on navigating media appearances has been kindly offered by Lauren MacLeod, an agent at Aevitas and a former Co-Vice President of the Association of American Literary Agents (AALA).

Step One: Establish your core message and key points

- **Core Message:** What is the central point you want to convey? Aim for a single sentence that encapsulates your main idea—keep this as brief and precise as possible. Questions to help you focus on this might include: What is my book’s fundamental message or theme, and how does the ban misinterpret or overlook this? Why is it important for my target audience or society as a whole to access and understand this message? What misconceptions or fears might be driving the ban? What are the most compelling examples or arguments from my book that I can use to illustrate its intended impact and value?
- **Define your purpose:** What do you want your audience to know, feel, or do after hearing your message?
- **Key Points:** Draft 3–5 key points that support your central message. Each should be a compelling piece of evidence or an argument that reinforces your main message. Questions to ask yourself might include: What are the main reasons cited for the ban, and how can I directly address or refute each of these in my key points? Which aspects of my book are most misunderstood, and how can I clarify these in my key points to change perceptions?

- Aim for your points to be easily understandable. Soundbites are more useful and memorable than long, overcomplicated answers.
- Avoid cluttering your argument with too much information or technical jargon.
- Use different rhetorical techniques and types of evidence—such as stories, statistics, analogies, testimonials, and logical arguments—to appeal to diverse audience preferences. To make your message memorable, use vivid language, relatable analogies, and striking statistics.

Step Two: Understand (and Research) Your Audience

While your core message and key points will largely remain the same, understanding who you are talking to (both the outlet and the audience/readership) will allow you to tailor your message so that it is most memorable and accessible.

Consider what your audience cares about, their values, and how your message relates to their interests or concerns. Ask yourself: How can I align my key points with broader themes or values that resonate with this audience?

Step Three: Anticipate

- Prepare for typical questions about your book, its concept, and the book ban. Ask yourself: what is the toughest question or criticism you could face? Common questions might include: What is your book about, and why do you think it was banned? How do you respond to the criticisms or concerns that led to the banning of your book? What impact do you believe the ban has had on the individuals and communities implicated by the book's content who no longer have access to it? Do you think there is a place for censorship or restriction of materials in libraries or schools? If so, under what circumstances? What message do you have for those who have banned your book, or for your readers who may be struggling to access it? How do you justify the inclusion of [specific controversial content] in your book, especially considering its potential impact on young or vulnerable readers? Considering the backlash and the ban, would you change anything about your book if you could?
- Practice answering these questions, aiming for concise and focused answers.
- If possible, enlist a trusted friend, colleague, or family member and sit for a mock interview.

Step Four: Staying on Message

When responding to a question, allow yourself a brief pause to collect your thoughts and calm the situation before responding.

- Sipping water or saying “that’s a good question” can provide you with a crucial moment to come up with a clear, intelligent answer.

Practice the art of redirecting and deflecting. If you are asked a question that leads you off track or makes you uncomfortable, consider:

- **Acknowledging and Pivoting**—briefly acknowledge the question and then transition with phrases like "What's really important here is...", "Let's not forget that...", or "The key issue is..."
- **Reframing**—try interpreting the question in a way that allows you to come back to your message and respond with the information you want to convey, not necessarily what was asked. A phrase you can use is "I think the question we should really be asking is..."
- **Repeating**—if interrupted or pushed off-topic, calmly restate your key points. Repetition can reinforce your message and steer the conversation.

Step Five

Try to end the interview with a clear call to action that ties back to your core message. Tell your audience exactly what you want them to do next.

DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK

Factors to consider when deciding to speak out about your banned book.

Context:

- **Nature of the Ban:** Understand the reasons and legal basis for the ban. Is it local, regional, or national? What specific content is being challenged?
- **Stakeholders Involved:** Identify who is responsible for the ban and who is opposing it. Consider the influence and authority of these groups.
- **Public Opinion:** Gauge the public response to the ban and media coverage of it. Is there significant outcry, support, or indifference?

Personal Values and Goals:

- **Reflect on your personal beliefs and what you hope to achieve by speaking out:** This may include defending freedom of expression and/or artistic and intellectual freedom, educating the public, generating support and solidarity, or raising awareness about censorship. What is your end goal?

Potential Impact:

- **On Yourself & Your Loved Ones:** Consider the possible repercussions of speaking out for your personal and professional life, including its potential effect on your public perception, personal safety and privacy (especially if the ban has led to threats or harassment), and emotional well-being. Consider asking a legal professional about the financial and legal implications of what you want to say.
- **On Your Audience & Community:** Evaluate how your response, or lack thereof, might affect your readers and/or those in your community.
- **On Broader Issues:** Consider how speaking out about the ban might drive larger legal or cultural changes and positively affect the issues you care about.
- **On Your Book:** Confer with your publisher and agent about the advantages and disadvantages that releasing a statement may have for your book(s).

REPORTING

Authors Against Book Bans (AABB) recommends reporting bans to all five groups linked below. ALA and PEN America both collect data on challenges and bans, and PEN can sometimes help with a response. School Library Journal can call more attention to the issue by providing press coverage. Every Library can help create a grassroots response where the challenge or ban is taking place, and National Coalition Against Censorship may be able to do so as well.

- [American Library Association](#)
- [PEN America](#)
- [School Library Journal](#)
- [Every Library](#)
- [National Coalition Against Censorship](#)

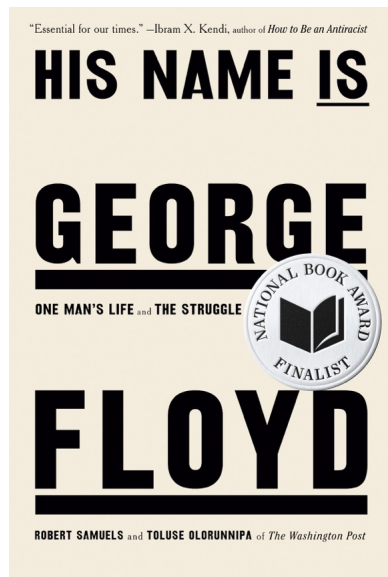
If your book is banned at an institution that receives DOE funding, consider reporting the ban to the DOE's Office for Civil Rights. The ban may constitute discrimination against a protected group.

- [Dept of Education's Office for Civil Rights](#)

BOOK BAN CASE STUDIES

TOLUSE OLORUNNIPA

Interview with Toluse Olorunnipa conducted by Aevitas' Sam Babiak



Summary

In 2023, Toluse and his co-author Robert Samuels were set to visit a high school in Tennessee to discuss their book *HIS NAME IS GEORGE FLOYD*. Just a few days before the event, they were informed by a reporter that their book had been banned. When they got in contact with the school, they were told they wouldn't be allowed to read from the book or to distribute it to students: their book wasn't "age appropriate" and the school's hands were tied. Toluse and Robert went on with the event. With support from their publisher, Viking, and their employer, *The Washington Post*, they partnered with a nonprofit organization to distribute free copies to students at a local mall.

Information

In conversation with Sam, Toluse recalled his uncertainty and confusion when he found out about the ban. He emphasized the importance of an author knowing as much information about the ban as possible as early as possible:

- Why is it being banned?
- Who is doing the banning?
- How exactly is the ban going to affect them?
- Who can you talk to in order to try to change the ban?

Additionally, he noted that it's important for authors to know where to turn in times like these.

Actionable Support

Reach out to your agent and publisher and work as a team to figure out a strategy.

Emotional support

It was important for Toluse to know that there were people in his corner who were just as outraged as he was.

Amplification

One of the most important takeaways from Toluse and Robert's experience with book banning was being able to use their voices to speak out about the ban. Because Robert and Toluse were already established journalists, they used their platforms to get the word out. Speaking out can help turn the negative book ban into something that could positively affect sales. But, Toluse noted, not all authors are as well connected.

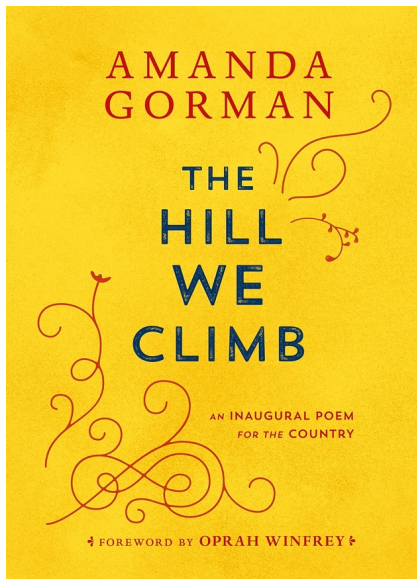
As mentioned above, Robert Samuel wrote a powerful essay in *The New Yorker* about his experience: ["When Your Own Book Gets Caught Up in the Censorship Wars."](#)

How can everyone on the author's team amplify the book and call attention to the situation?

Some ideas for raising awareness:

- You author can publish essays/articles about the ban. Opinion pieces and/or Letters to the editor at both a state and local level are good vehicles. You can also send them to key legislators at the state level, including school board members. The state level ALA usually has an Intellectual Freedom Committee.
- You and/or your publisher can lead a call for action on social media;
- Your publisher can line up book events, virtual or in-person, to get the book into readers' hands;
- You and/or your publisher can line up an interview with a local news channel or prominent journalist;
- You and/or your publisher can join ongoing legal fights against book bans in the area or nationally.

"Don't just accept the impact of a book ban. You can reverse it, you can push back against it, you can use it to your own advantage. The ultimate goal is to get the book in front of more people and sometimes you can even use the ban to do that. And I would say, don't allow [a ban] to take place without speaking out, without taking action, without being proactive using this toolkit and the other tools that might be available to push back. Be your own advocate because no one else is going to fight for your book the way you do." – TOLUSE OLORUNNIPA



After a book by Amanda Gorman was restricted in a Miami-Dade county school, a local independent bookstore organized a campaign to make it and other restricted books available to students and parents for free.

Links

- **Miami Herald:** [Bookshop to give away restricted books in Miami-Dade](#)
- **Shelf Awareness:** [Miami's Books & Books Distributes Free Copies of Banned Titles](#)

BANNED BOOK CASE STUDY: PUBLICITY AND “STREISAND EFFECT” FOR BANNED BOOKS

Efforts to ban books in the US can give them publicity, leading to stronger sales.

- **Davidson College:** [With Book Bans on the Rise, Prof Examines Importance of Banned Books Week](#)
- **The Hill:** [How banning books can actually increase their sales](#)

Conclusion

It is highly unlikely that a book ban could lead to increased sales at this point, and the sheer number of books being banned makes it difficult to organize a campaign around each one. Indeed, in addition to the emotional and psychological toll a ban can have on an author, it can have a negative commercial impact on their book sales.

However, there is more organizational support for authors now, as we have listed above, and communities of like-minded individuals they can join. Not only is that network and mutual support reassuring but being part of these wider collectives in turn gives the fight against book bans more leverage and strength.

Authors do not need to accept book bans and they are not alone in this fight. As we have outlined above, there are steps authors and their teams can take to call attention to and hopefully reverse book bans. Together, we can make an impact in fighting book bans.

FURTHER RESOURCES

TOOL KITS

There is a lot of overlap between these tool kits. Some are for a wide variety of stakeholders (including booksellers and librarians) while others are specifically for authors. We Need Diverse Books is the only organization besides AABB that also provides testimonials from frequently banned authors. AABB's tool kit additionally provides slides, examples, and talking points.

- [American Library Association](#)
- [American Booksellers Association](#)
- [Authors Against Book Bans](#)
- [Authors Guild](#)
- [Book Riot](#)
- [Macmillan](#)
- [National Coalition Against Censorship](#)
- [PEN America](#)
- [Penguin Random House](#)
- [Simon & Schuster](#)
- [United Against Book Bans](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books](#)

AUTHORS AGAINST BOOK BANS

A proactive first step that all authors can take is to join [Authors Against Book Bans](#) (AABB), an organization formed in January 2024. They define an author as anyone whose name is on the front of a book (including anthologists, translators, etc.).

As of April 2024, they have over 1,250 members and their mission is to form an “author army” to aid grassroots organizations in their fights against book bans. They respond state by state and on a community level; essentially any time other authors are needed to challenge a book ban, they want to be able to help.

Nationally, they want to be a source for calls to action and to create a consistent playbook for authors, including coordinating in-person actions, school board meetings, state legislation talks, etc.

Authors Against Book Bans shared the following links:

- [Author sign-up form](#)
- [Toolkit guide](#)
- [Author talking points](#)
- [AABB Instagram](#)
- [Slides for authors to use \(including action items\)](#)
- [Author sign-up form \(for inclusion in form letters\)](#)

OTHER INTERNATIONAL/NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- [PEN International](#)
- [PEN America](#)
- [United Against Book Bans](#)
- [American Booksellers Association](#)
- [American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression](#)
- [American Library Association](#)
- [Association of American Literary Agents](#)
- [GLAAD](#)
- [Banned Books Club](#)
- [Fight for the First](#)
- [Every Library](#)
- [National Coalition Against Censorship](#)
- [Freedom to Read Foundation](#)
- [National Council of Teachers of English \(Intellectual Freedom Center\)](#)
- [Banned Books Week Coalition](#)
- [The Authors Guild](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books](#)

REGIONAL/LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

- [Books Unbanned – Seattle Public Library](#)
- [Books Unbanned – Brooklyn Public Library](#)
- [Books Unbanned – Boston Public Library](#)
- [Books Unbanned – LA County Public Library](#)
- [Books Unbanned – San Diego Public Library](#)
- [Texas Library Association / Texans for the Right to Read](#)
- [Equality Florida](#)
- [Florida Freedom to Read Project](#)
- [Tennessee Coalition for Truth in Our Classrooms](#)
- [South Carolina Association of School Librarians – Intellectual Freedom Committee](#)
- [Ohio Library Council – Intellectual Freedom](#)

SAFETY RESOURCES

[PEN America's Online Harassment Field Manual](#)

LITIGATION & LEGISLATION RESOURCES

[Freedom to Read Foundation: Litigation and the Courts](#)

[The Media Coalition Foundation: Legislation](#)

[The Media Coalition Foundation: Litigation](#)

PUBLISHERS

- [Penguin Random House](#)
- [Simon & Schuster](#)
- [Hachette](#)
- [Macmillan](#)
- [HarperCollins](#)

LEGAL RESOURCES

LAW FIRM	LAWYER	EMAIL ADDRESS	PHONE NUMBER	WEBSITE	NOTES
Protect Democracy	Shalini Goel Agarwal			Profile	PEN v. Escambia
Protect Democracy	John Langford		202.579.4582	Profile	PEN v. Escambia
Protect Democracy	Kristy Parker			Profile	PEN v. Escambia
Ballard Spahr LLC	Lynn B. Oberlander	oberlanderl@ballardspahr.com	646.346.8011	Profile	PEN v. Escambia
Ballard Spahr LLC	Paul J. Safier	safierp@ballardspahr.com	215.988.9146	Profile	PEN v. Escambia
Ballard Spahr LLC	Shawn F. Summers	summerss@ballardspahr.com	215.864.8347		PEN v. Escambia
ACLU				Banned Books	
Authors Guild	Cheryl L. Davis			Profile	Banned Books and the Law
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Elizabeth A. McNamara	lizmcnamara@dwt.com	212.603.6437	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Robert D. Balin	robbalin@dwt.com	212.603.6440	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Katherine M. Bolger	katebolger@dwt.com	212.402.4068	Profile	

LAW FIRM	LAWYER	EMAIL ADDRESS	PHONE NUMBER	WEBSITE	NOTES
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	John M. Browning	jackbrowning@dwt.com	212.603.6410	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Thomas R. Burke	thomasburke@dwt.com	415.276.6552	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Alex Cadena	alexcadena@dwt.com	213.655.9655	Profile	Alex is committed to pro bono
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Jeremy A. Chase	jeremychase@dwt.com	212.603.6495	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Evan Coppotelli	evancoppotelli@dwt.com	212.489.8230	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Laura R. Handman	laurahandman@dwt.com	202.973.4224 (Washington, D.C.) 212.489.8230 (New York)	Profile	
Davis Wright Tremaine LLP	Abigail Everdell	abigaileverdell@dwt.com	212.603.6468	Profile	
Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts				Get Help	
Cahill (Pro Bono for the Arts)	Brockton B. Bosson	bbosson@cahill.com	212.701.3136	Profile	Brockton is the Partner Advisor for Cahill's Pro Bono for the Arts

CONCLUSION

We hope you have found this IOI on book banning informative, practical, and to some degree reassuring. You are not alone, and as the number of book bans rise, so does the resistance against them. We are here to support you!