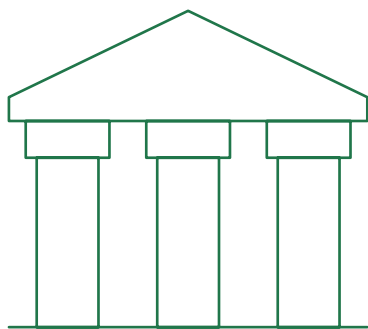
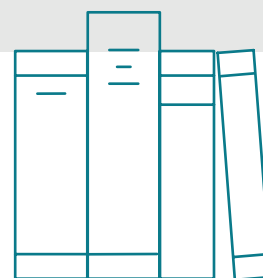
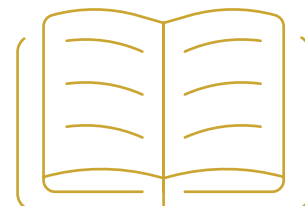


# Americans' Views on Book Restrictions in U.S. Public Schools



A study from the Knight Free Expression  
Research Series

August 2024





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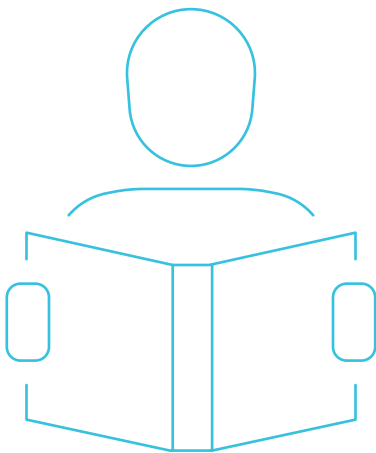
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# Executive Summary

**B**ook challenges and restrictions in U.S. public schools have increased dramatically since 2021.<sup>1</sup> Yet research on public awareness, attitudes and engagement in these activities is limited. In an effort to fill this critical knowledge gap in the national dialogue, Knight Foundation partnered with Langer Research Associates to survey a random national sample of more than 4,500 adults, deeply exploring public attitudes on restricting students' access to books in public schools. This research extends the foundation's two-decade history of public opinion polling on attitudes toward the First Amendment and free expression.



Among the key findings:

**Majorities of Americans feel informed about book restriction efforts and say the issue is personally important to them. Still, few actively participate.**

- About six in 10 feel informed about debates to restrict access to books in public schools. As many call the issue highly important.
- About one in four (23 percent) are aware of efforts to restrict public school students' access to books in their community. Thirteen percent say book access in fact has been restricted due to these efforts.
- Far fewer, 3 percent, personally have engaged on this issue: 2 percent to maintain book access, 1 percent to restrict it.

<sup>1</sup> See Meehan, K., Baêta, S., Markham, M., & Magnusson, T. (2024). *Banned in the USA: Narrating the Crisis*. PEN America. <https://pen.org/report/narrating-the-crisis/>



## **Two-thirds of Americans oppose efforts to restrict books in public schools and most are confident in public schools' selection of books.**

- Strong sentiment is lopsided, with strong opponents of book restrictions outnumbering strong supporters by nearly 3-1.
- In general terms, 78 percent of adults are confident that their community's public schools select appropriate books for students to read.
- Additionally, more people say it is a bigger concern to restrict students' access to books that have educational value than it is to provide them with access to books that have inappropriate content. This view is especially prevalent when it comes to middle and high school students.

## **Most Americans see age appropriateness as a legitimate issue, especially for younger students – even as concern about exposure to inappropriate books is limited. Marking the issue's complexity, trust in specific groups to determine age appropriateness is lower than trust in schools' book selections more generally.**

- Six in 10 see age appropriateness as a legitimate reason to restrict students' book access. Far fewer say it is legitimate to block access to books that contradict parents' political views, religious beliefs or moral values.
- Potentially controversial topics are more likely to be seen as appropriate for high school students, followed by middle school students; objections rise when it comes to content for elementary school students. These views are sharply divided, especially along ideological lines.
- Just 7 percent of parents with reading-age children say their child has read an age-inappropriate book from school.<sup>2</sup> Among pre-K-12 parents, a quarter are concerned about this happening in the future, leaving 74 percent not concerned about it.

<sup>2</sup> We define "reading-age children" as K-12 students, excluding those in pre-K.

## **Two-thirds of Americans oppose efforts to restrict books in public schools.**

- No one group has broad trust to determine what books are age appropriate. Roughly half of Americans have a great deal or good amount of trust in librarians and teachers to do this; fewer say so about principals, parents, district leaders, the state government or non-parents.

### **Who supports book restriction efforts?**

- Ideology is a major factor in attitudes on the issue. Support for restricting students' access to books is highest among people who identify themselves as conservatives. Indeed, while conservatives account for 29 percent of all adults, they make up 57 percent of book restriction supporters.
- Support for book restrictions in the public schools also reaches majorities among more-conservative groups such as white evangelical Protestants, Republicans and parents with children in private, religious or homeschool settings.
- Underlying attitudes are involved. Conservatives are less likely than other people to think that books in public schools adequately represent conservative political views. They also are less confident in schools' handling of topics including moral values, gender and sexuality, religious beliefs and political views. And they are particularly opposed to the availability of books that discuss topics such as non-traditional gender identities and sexual orientation.



# Large majorities say children should develop their own political opinions, moral values and religious beliefs.

## Who opposes book restriction efforts?

- Opposition to book restrictions peaks among liberals, Democrats and LGBTQ adults. It is modestly higher among four-year college graduates, moderates and Black people compared with all adults.
- Opposing book restrictions is strongly related to views on free expression and individual thinking. Large majorities of Americans say children should develop their own political opinions, moral values and religious beliefs, rather than adopting their parents' points of view. More than half also think that book restriction efforts threaten students' freedom of expression. Those holding these views are highly opposed to book restriction efforts.
- Views among public school parents show the issue's complexity. These parents are broadly confident in their public schools to select appropriate books, and most (59 percent) oppose book restriction efforts. Still, that is 8 points lower than the level of opposition to book restriction efforts among non-parents, 67 percent.

## Nearly all adults think public school parents should be able to challenge books, but there is concern about potential chilling effects in book selection.

- Nine in 10 think any public school parent should be able to submit a book complaint to their local district. However, three-quarters also think an investigation should occur only after multiple complaints are received.

- About six in 10 also are concerned that fear of complaints might deter public school districts from purchasing books with educational value.
- About two-thirds think public school teachers and librarians should have substantial say in deciding what books are available; 57 percent say the same about pre-K-12 parents. In contrast, just about two in 10 say so about their state government or community members who are not pre-K-12 parents.

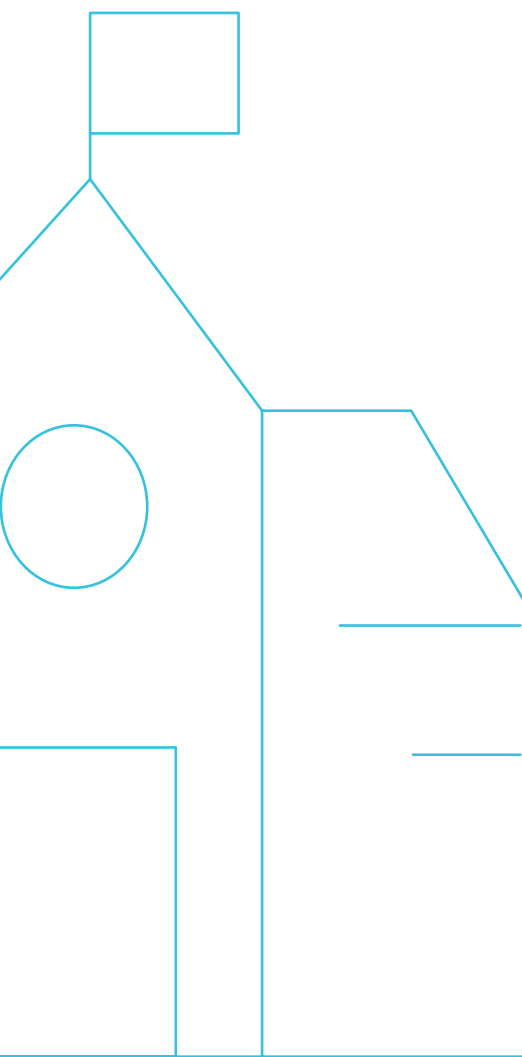
## About this study

Results presented in this report are from a national survey of 4,567 adults, including 1,138 pre-K-12 parents, conducted Feb. 29-March 10, 2024, via the probability-based Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, with design, management and analysis by Langer Research Associates. Results have a margin of error of plus or minus 1.6 percentage points for the full sample. As in all surveys, error margins are larger for subgroups.

In addition to the full report that follows, a supplemental report provides topline data, a detailed methodology statement and a desk review of prior research. The full dataset, responses to open-ended questions and tables of crosstabulated data also are available at <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/americans-views-on-book-restrictions-in-u-s-public-schools-2024/>.



# Acknowledgements



## About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

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## Advisory Team

Thank you to the advisory team that helped steer this research program.

**Eitan Hersh**, Professor of Political Science, Tufts University

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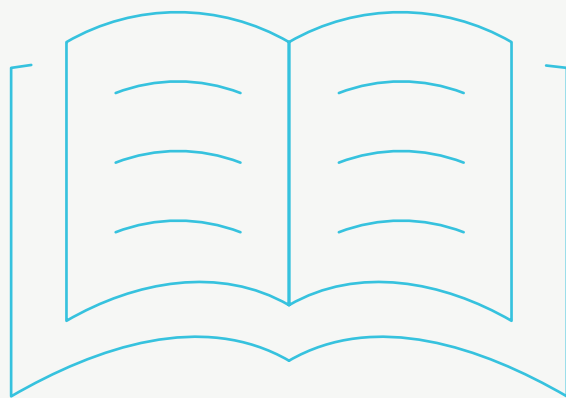
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# Attitudes and Engagement on Book Restrictions

Part 1 of this report explores Americans' general attitudes about book restriction efforts in U.S. public schools, including their awareness of such efforts, whether they support or oppose them, and personal involvement. Related views about their community's public schools, including confidence in them to select appropriate books for students, also are covered.



**Majorities feel informed about book restriction efforts and call the issue personally important. At the same time, comparatively few parents express concern about their child being exposed to problematic books.**

Most Americans are aware of recent debates on restricting access to books in public schools; 61 percent feel very or somewhat informed on the topic. As is typical on public policy issues, more feel somewhat informed, 43 percent, than very informed, 18 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Feeling informed is far higher among those who very or somewhat closely follow national news (72 vs. 40 percent) or local news (70 vs. 47 percent), compared with those who follow the news less closely.

<sup>3</sup> All differences described in this report have been tested for statistical significance. Those that are significant at the 95 percent confidence level (or higher) are reported without qualification. Those that are significant at 90-94 percent confidence are described as "slight" differences. Those that are significant at less than 90 percent confidence are not reported as differences.



Sixty-two percent overall call the issue of public school students' access to books extremely or very important to them personally. Twenty-three percent call it somewhat important, leaving 13 percent who call it less important than that.

**% calling public school students' access to books extremely or very important**

All	62%
Public school parents, grades pre-K-5	71
Non-parents	62
Public school parents, grades 6-12 only	58
Non-public school parents	55
Black people	68
Hispanic people	67
Asian people	61
White people	60
Liberals	76
Moderates	61
Conservatives	55
Democrats	73
Independents	60
Republicans	55

Parents of younger public school students, those in grades pre-K-5, are especially apt to call the issue highly important to them; 71 percent do so.<sup>4,5</sup> This reflects greater sensitivity about the content of elementary school books, detailed in Part 2.

Calling the issue highly important also is higher among people who identify themselves as liberals compared with conservatives, and among Democrats compared with Republicans. (Moderates are closer to conservatives on this measure, independents closer to Republicans.) It is modestly higher among Black and

Hispanic people than among white people. Among Asian people, it is slightly lower than among Black people, while not significantly different from white or Hispanic people.

While awareness and perceived importance are high, concern that children will be exposed to problematic books is far more limited. Specifically, comparatively few pre-K-12 parents, 26 percent, are very or somewhat concerned about the chance that a child of theirs might read an age-inappropriate book from their school at some point in the future. Attitudes about age appropriateness are detailed in Part 2.

**% very or somewhat concerned about your child reading an age-inappropriate book from school**

*Among pre-K-12 parents*

All	26%
Conservatives	44
Moderates	20
Liberals	15
Republicans	35
Independents	28
Democrats	15
Hispanic parents	38
Asian parents	34
Black parents	30
White parents	21

Among groups, concern is much higher among conservative parents (at 44 percent) than among moderate (20 percent) or liberal (15 percent) parents. It is also higher among Republican parents compared with Democratic parents (as is often the case, independents fall in between), and among Hispanic, Asian and Black parents compared with white parents.

4 For brevity, we identify adults with a child in pre-K-12 public school or public charter school as "public school parents" (17 percent of adults); those with a pre-K-12 child in private, religious or home school as "non-public school parents" (4 percent of adults) and those without a child in pre-K-12 as "non-parents" (80 percent of adults). (One percent of adults have children in both public and non-public schools.)

5 There are too few non-public school parents in the sample to analyze separately by their child's grade in school.





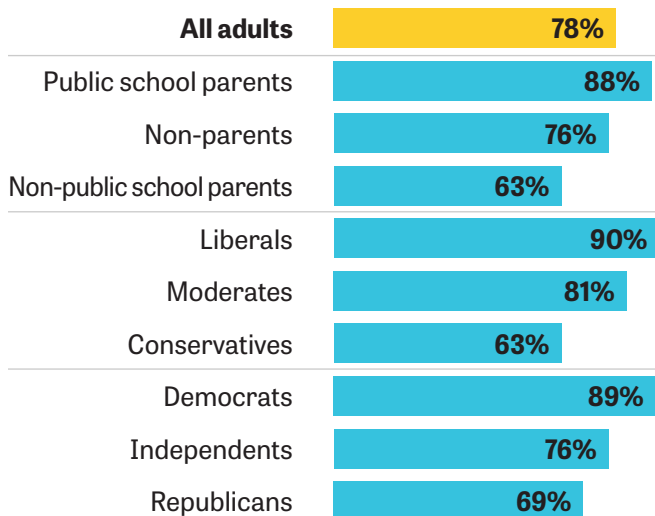
Even fewer K-12 parents, 7 percent, report that a child of theirs has read a book from their school that they felt was inappropriate for their age. An additional 11 percent are unsure about this, while 82 percent say it hasn't happened.

Uncertainty about whether their child has read an age-inappropriate book from their school reaches 20 percent among very conservative parents, vs. 4 percent among liberal parents. (Thirteen percent of moderate parents are unsure.) It is 19 percent among Asian parents, higher than among Black parents (10 percent) or white parents (9 percent). Among Hispanic parents (15 percent), it is slightly higher than white parents while similar to the result among Asian parents. (The difference between Hispanic parents and Black parents on this question is not statistically significant, given sample sizes.)

**Substantial majorities of Americans are confident in their local public schools' book selection and see their schools as responsive to parents' concerns.**

Americans express high levels of overall trust in public schools' book selections. Seventy-eight percent are very (33 percent) or somewhat (45 percent) confident that teachers and librarians in their community's public schools select books that are appropriate for students to read. An identical 78 percent also think the public schools in their community are very (19 percent) or somewhat (59 percent) responsive to the concerns of parents.

**Very or somewhat confident that local public schools select appropriate books**



These views are strongly associated. People who call their local schools very or somewhat responsive are 40 percentage points more apt than those calling them less responsive to be confident that their public school teachers and librarians select appropriate books, 87 vs. 47 percent. Parents who see their schools as responsive also are less apt to be concerned about their child reading an age-inappropriate book from school, 23 vs. 39 percent.

Proximity to public schools is another factor. While 88 percent of public school parents are confident in book selection by teachers and librarians, this slips to 76 percent among non-parents and falls further to 63 percent among non-public school parents, who are consistently more skeptical of the public schools.

Among other groups, confidence in the schools to select appropriate books is higher among liberals and Democrats than among conservatives and Republicans, with moderates somewhat closer to liberals and independents somewhat closer to Republicans. By contrast, confidence largely is consistent among racial/ethnic groups.

Views on the quality of local public schools also are related to confidence in their selection of appropriate books. Forty percent of Americans rate the overall quality of the public schools in their community as excellent or very good, and a vast 93 percent in this group are confident in the appropriateness of their schools' book selections. Among the four in 10 adults who rate school quality as "good," a still-broad 77 percent are confident in their schools' selection of books. This falls to 47 percent among the relatively few who call the quality of their public schools not so good or poor.

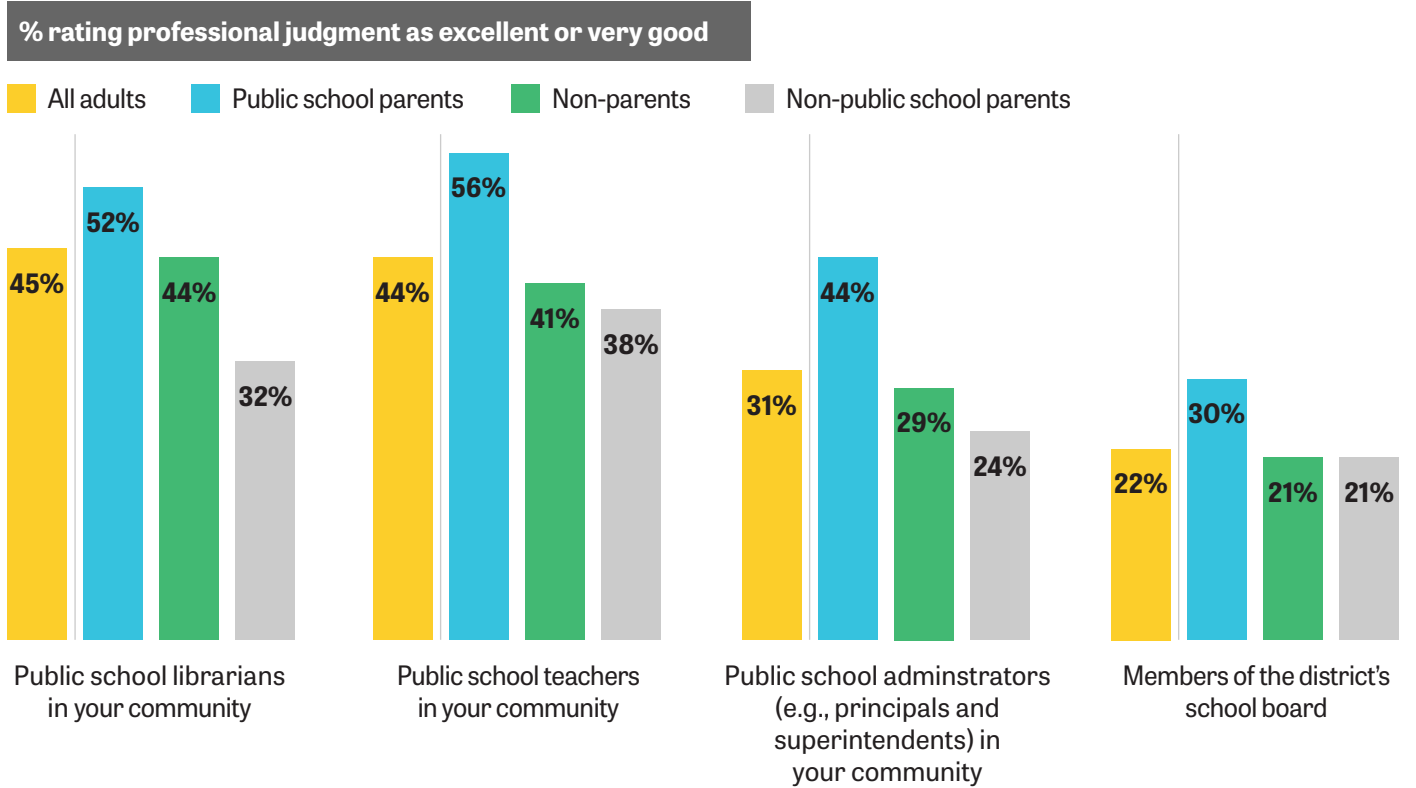
**Confidence that local public schools select appropriate books**

**Among those who rate local public school quality as...**

Excellent or very good (40%)	93%
Good (41%)	77
Not so good or poor (17%)	47



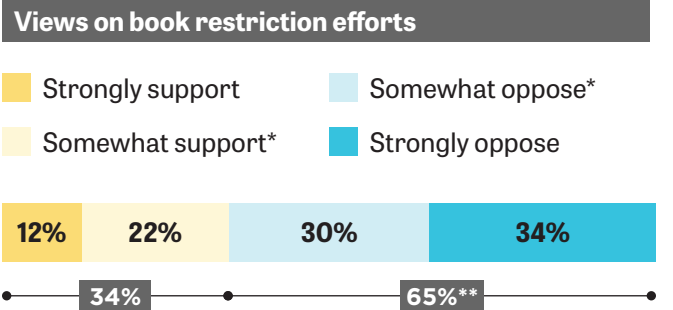
Echoing views on school quality, 45 percent of adults overall rate the professional judgment of their community’s public school librarians as excellent or very good, and it is essentially the same, 44 percent, for teachers; as many rate the judgment of each as good. High-level ratings weaken for public school administrators (with 31 percent seen as having excellent or very good judgment) and members of the district’s school board (22 percent). As on other measures, ratings are higher from public school parents than from others



**Two-thirds of Americans oppose efforts to restrict books in public schools.**

Reflecting substantial confidence in public schools to select appropriate books, and little exposure to inappropriate ones, most Americans, 65 percent, oppose efforts to restrict book access in the public schools. Thirty-four percent support such efforts.<sup>6</sup>

Strength of sentiment also is lopsided: Thirty-four percent strongly oppose book restriction efforts, while 12 percent strongly support them.

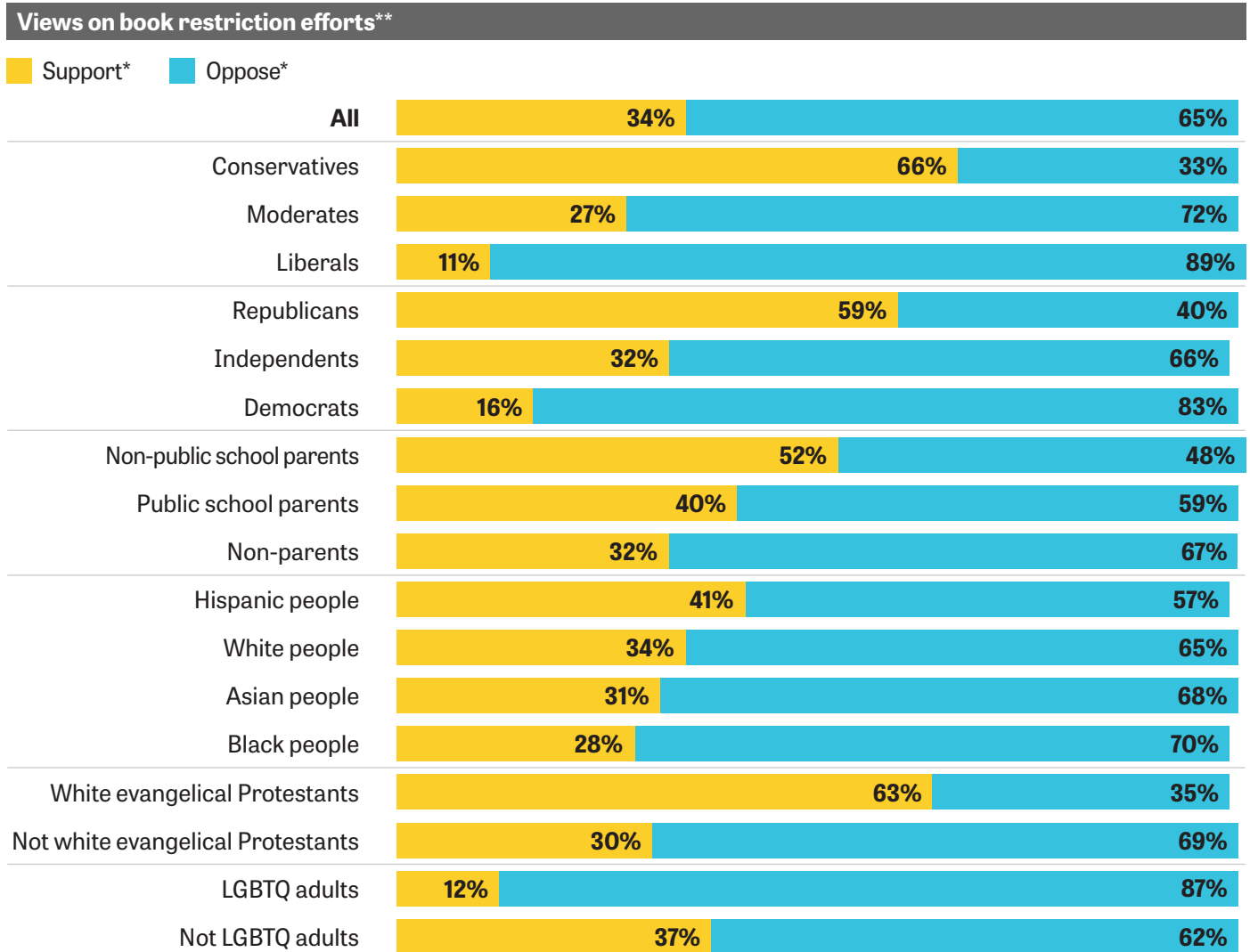


\*Includes leaners. See footnote 6.  
 \*\*Individual items do not match total because of rounding.

<sup>6</sup> This includes the 23 percent of adults who initially expressed no opinion and were asked which way they leaned. They opposed restriction efforts by 2-1.



There are sharp ideological and political gaps on the question. Eighty-nine percent of liberals are opposed to book restrictions, with 67 percent strongly opposed. Among moderates, 72 percent are opposed. By contrast, 66 percent of conservatives support book restriction efforts. In partisan terms, 83 percent of Democrats and 66 percent of independents oppose book restriction efforts, while 59 percent of Republicans support them.



\*Includes leaners

\*\*Individual items may not total to 100 because of respondents who skipped questions.

Support for book restrictions is higher among non-public school parents (52 percent) than among public school parents (40 percent) and non-parents (32 percent) alike. Modestly higher support for restrictions among public school parents than non-parents (an 8-point gap) underscores complex views about age appropriateness and access to inappropriate content, detailed in Part 2 of this report.

In further results among groups, support for book restrictions is modestly higher among Hispanic people than among white, Asian or Black people, higher among white evangelical Protestants than their counterparts and lower among LGBTQ adults than among non-LGBTQ adults. That said, support or opposition to book restrictions is similar regardless of whether people call the issue highly important or unimportant.



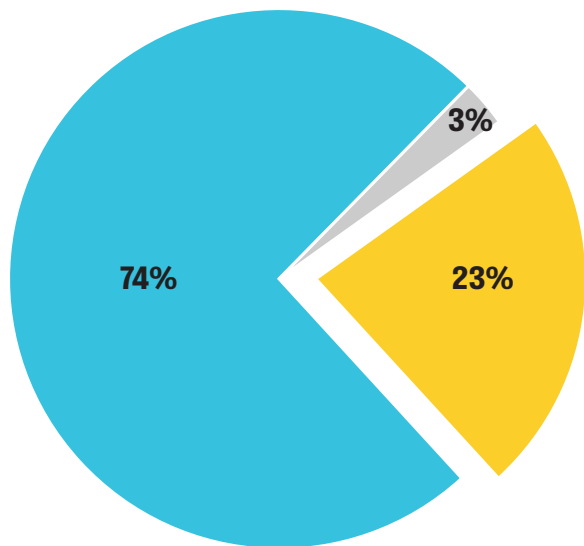
## While direct engagement on book restriction efforts is low, awareness of such efforts locally is higher.

Comparatively few people are directly involved in book restriction efforts. Just 3 percent of Americans overall say they have participated in trying either to maintain or to restrict students' access to a book in their community's public schools. Two percent had the goal of maintaining students' book access; 1 percent sought to restrict it.

Still, awareness of local restriction efforts is substantial: Twenty-three percent overall – that is, nearly one in four adults – are aware of efforts to restrict the availability of books in their own community's public schools.

### Have there been efforts to restrict books in your local public schools?

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Skipped



#### If efforts to restrict books: Have you personally participated in trying to maintain or restrict students' book access?

Percentages are among all adults

Yes, to maintain students' book access

2%

Yes, to restrict students' book access

1%

No

20%

#### If efforts to restrict books: Have efforts resulted in students' access to books being restricted?

Percentages are among all adults

Yes

13%

No

10%

Thirteen percent of all adults are aware of local restriction efforts that in fact resulted in books being restricted. (That amounts to more than half, 55 percent, of those who are aware of any such efforts.) Ten percent of adults are aware of efforts that did not result in restrictions.

Most of those who are aware of any such effort say it last happened recently – within the last year (54 percent) or one to three years ago (37 percent). Just 8 percent say the most recent occurrence was longer ago than that.

Lastly on awareness, there is a regional difference: Awareness of local book restriction efforts is higher in the South (32 percent) than in the Midwest (22 percent), West (19 percent) or Northeast (13 percent). The same is true for awareness of efforts that resulted in restrictions, 20 percent in the South, vs. 9 percent in the Midwest, 8 percent in the West and 6 percent in the Northeast. That comports with reports that such efforts are particularly prevalent in Florida and Texas.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Meehan et al. (2023), <https://pen.org/report/book-bans-pressure-to-censor/>.

# Attitudes About Age Appropriateness

Part 2 investigates in-depth views on age appropriateness and book content, including reasons to restrict books in public schools, what types of content should be available, trust in different groups to make decisions about book availability and trust in public schools to handle sensitive topics appropriately.

**Six in 10 see age appropriateness as a legitimate reason to restrict book access, while far fewer say the same about other potential reasons.**

Despite overall opposition to book restriction efforts, 61 percent of adults say a parent's complaint that the book is not age appropriate is a legitimate reason to restrict book access. Thirty-nine percent say this is not a legitimate reason.<sup>8</sup>

The majority viewpoint aligns with a 1982 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court allowing public schools to ban

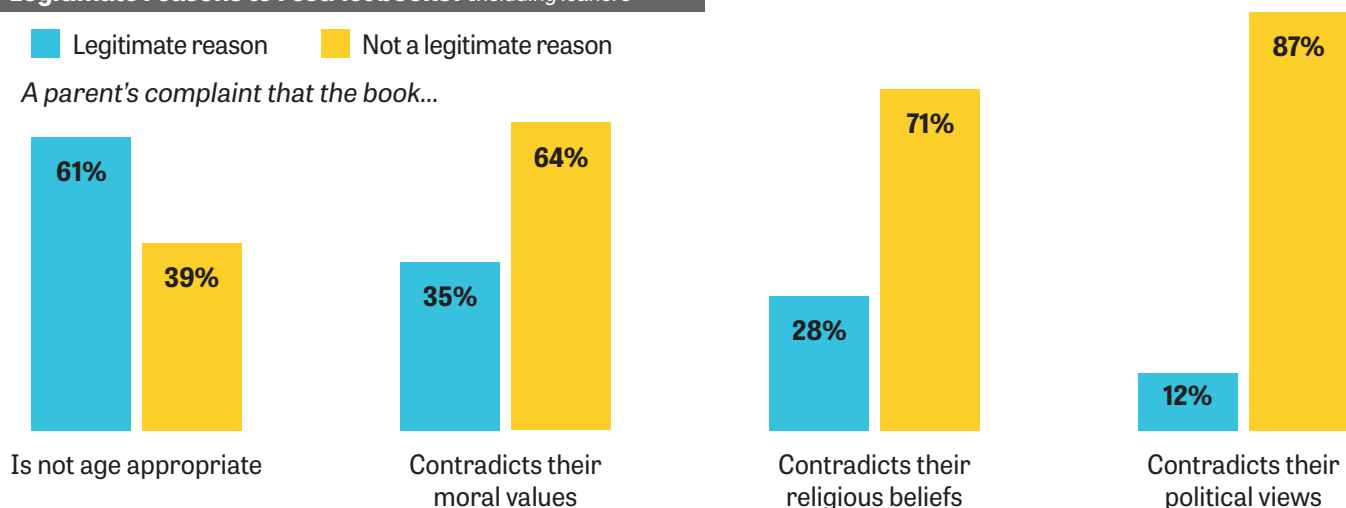
library books for lack of age appropriateness, vulgarity or lack of educational suitability, but not to censor a disfavored viewpoint or to establish orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the public broadly sees three other possible underlying motivations for parents' complaints as illegitimate reasons to restrict book access. These include complaints that the book contradicts their political views (87-12 percent, not legitimate-legitimate), their religious beliefs (71-28 percent) and their moral values (64-35 percent).<sup>10</sup>

## Legitimate reasons to restrict books? *Including leaners*

■ Legitimate reason    ■ Not a legitimate reason

*A parent's complaint that the book...*



<sup>8</sup> This includes leaners. Asked initially, 52 percent called this a legitimate reason, 28 percent not legitimate and 19 percent were neutral or had no opinion. Asked how they leaned, those in the latter group called it not legitimate by 54-42 percent.

<sup>9</sup> See Kim's (2022) discussion of *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* (1982), <https://kappanonline.org/banning-books-unlawful-censorship-discretion-kim/>.

<sup>10</sup> Again, these include leaners who first said they were neutral or had no opinion.



**Trust is muted in individual groups to make decisions on age appropriateness, with public school librarians and teachers topping the list.**

Part 1 of this report described high levels of overall confidence that teachers and librarians select appropriate books for students. As mentioned, the story becomes more complex when considering who should be trusted to make decisions specifically on whether a book is age appropriate.

Compared to overall confidence, trust is more muted when it comes to specific groups making these decisions. At the top, 53 percent trust public school librarians a great deal or good amount in this regard. Fifty percent say the same for public school teachers.

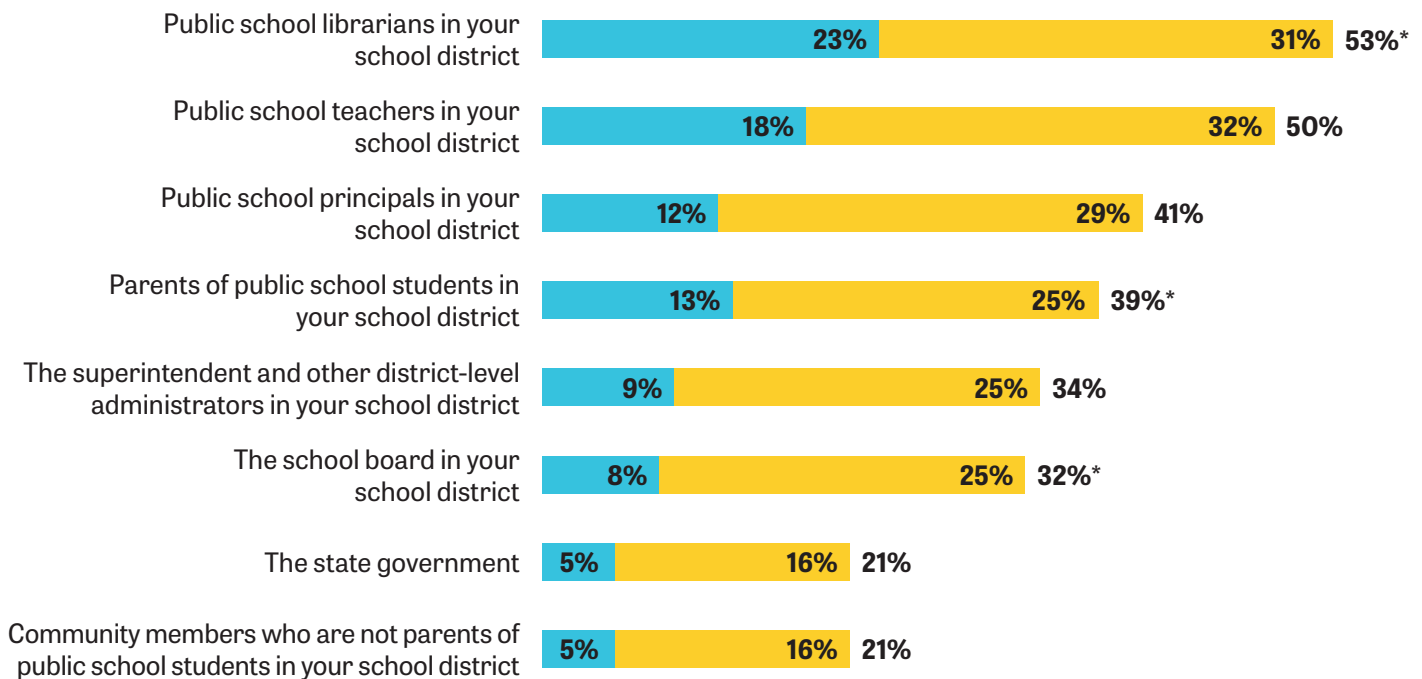
Trust declines with distance from the classroom. Four in 10 express high-level trust in age-appropriateness decisions by public school principals (41 percent)

# Trust is highest in public school librarians and teachers to determine age appropriateness.

and parents of public school students in their district (39 percent). A third say the same for district-level administrators (34 percent) and the school board (32 percent). The fewest, 21 percent apiece, highly trust either the state government or non-parent community members to determine age appropriateness.

## Trust to decide if books are age appropriate for students in your community's public schools

■ A great deal   ■ A good amount



\*Individual items do not match total because of rounding.



Contrasting with broad overall confidence that teachers and librarians in local public schools select appropriate books, lower levels of trust in specific groups to determine age appropriateness may reflect both the complexity of such determinations and a preference not to have one group alone make these decisions.

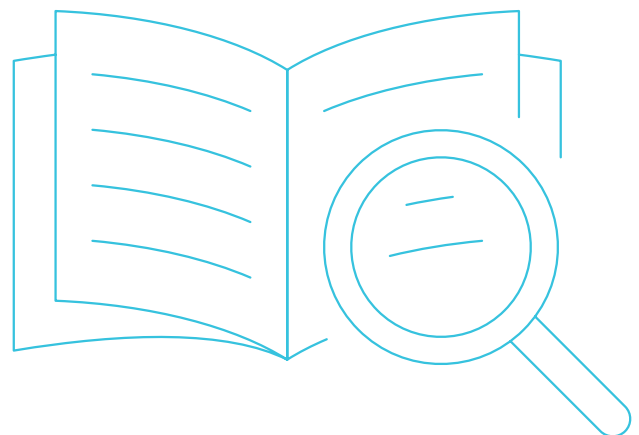
In any case, as on other measures, those closest to the issue, public school parents, are more likely than non-public school parents and non-parents alike to trust public school librarians, teachers, principals, superintendents and school boards. (These groups are similar in their trust of state government, public school parents or community members who are not public school parents.)

### Trust to decide if books are age appropriate for students in your community's public schools

	Public school parents	Non-public school parents	Non-parents
Public school librarians in your school district	58%	46%	52%
Public school teachers in your school district	57	46	49
Public school principals in your school district	51	35	39
The superintendent and other district-level administrators in your school district	42	28	33
Parents of public school students in your school district	41	38	38
The school board in your school district	38	28	31
The state government	23	20	21
Community members who are not parents of public school students in your school district	21	23	21

### Views about appropriate book content differ depending on grade levels. There also are sharp divisions among groups, especially by ideology, in views of what is appropriate.

Concerns about content focus especially on elementary schools. Most people think that books with four types of potentially controversial content should be available to public high school students. Fewer, but still more than half, say the same for middle school students. Fewer still say so for elementary school students.

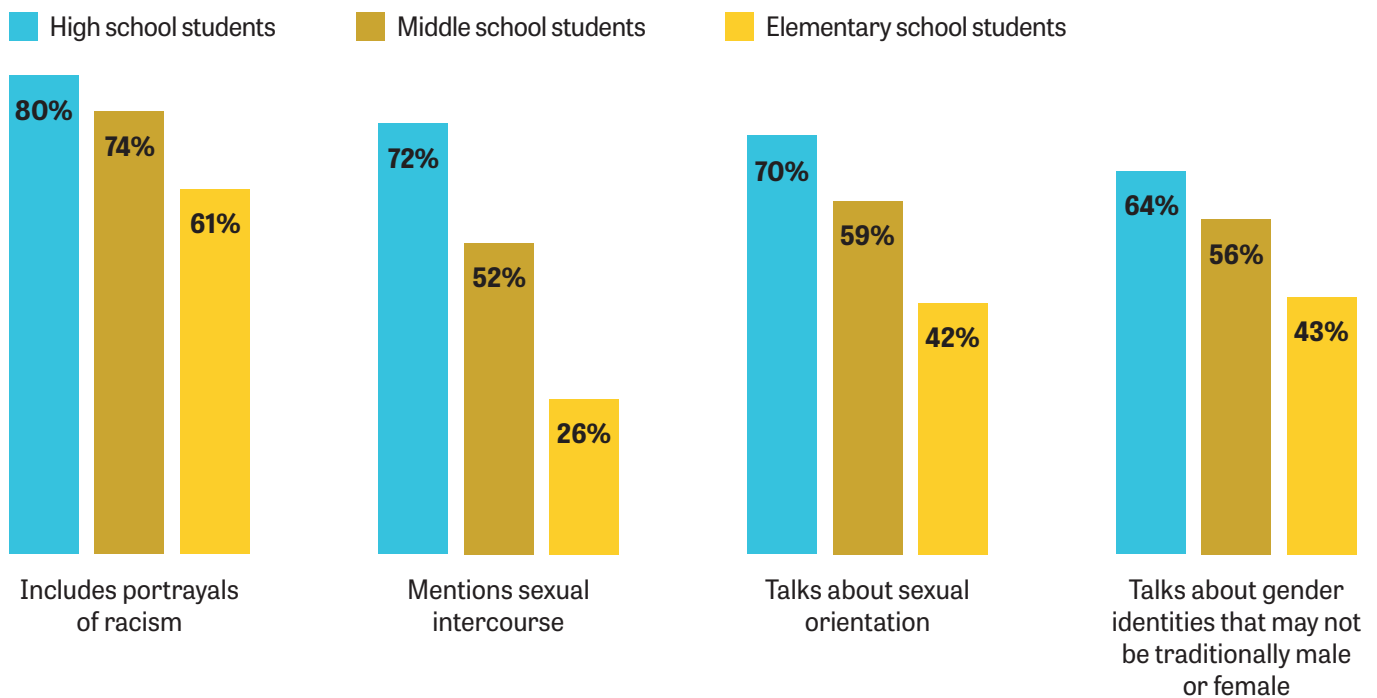




In the widest gap, 72 percent think books that mention sexual intercourse should be available to high school students. It is 52 percent for middle school students and 26 percent for elementary school students.

Additionally, 70 percent think books that talk about sexual orientation should be available to high school students, vs. 59 percent for middle school students and 42 percent for elementary school students. And in terms of books that talk about gender identities that may not be traditionally male or female, 64 percent think these should be available to high school students, 56 percent for middle school students and 43 percent for elementary school students.

### Should these be available to public school students if selected by educators but some community members object?



By contrast, books that include portrayals of racism get majority support for inclusion across school levels. Eighty percent think books with this content should be available to high school students; 74 percent, to middle school students; and 61 percent, to elementary school students.

Among groups, there are substantial gaps in the shares who think books that include these topics should be available.

- **Parents:** Public school parents are more apt than non-public school parents to think books that talk about sexual orientation should be available for elementary (42 vs. 28 percent), middle (58 vs. 40 percent) and high school (71 vs. 55 percent) students alike.

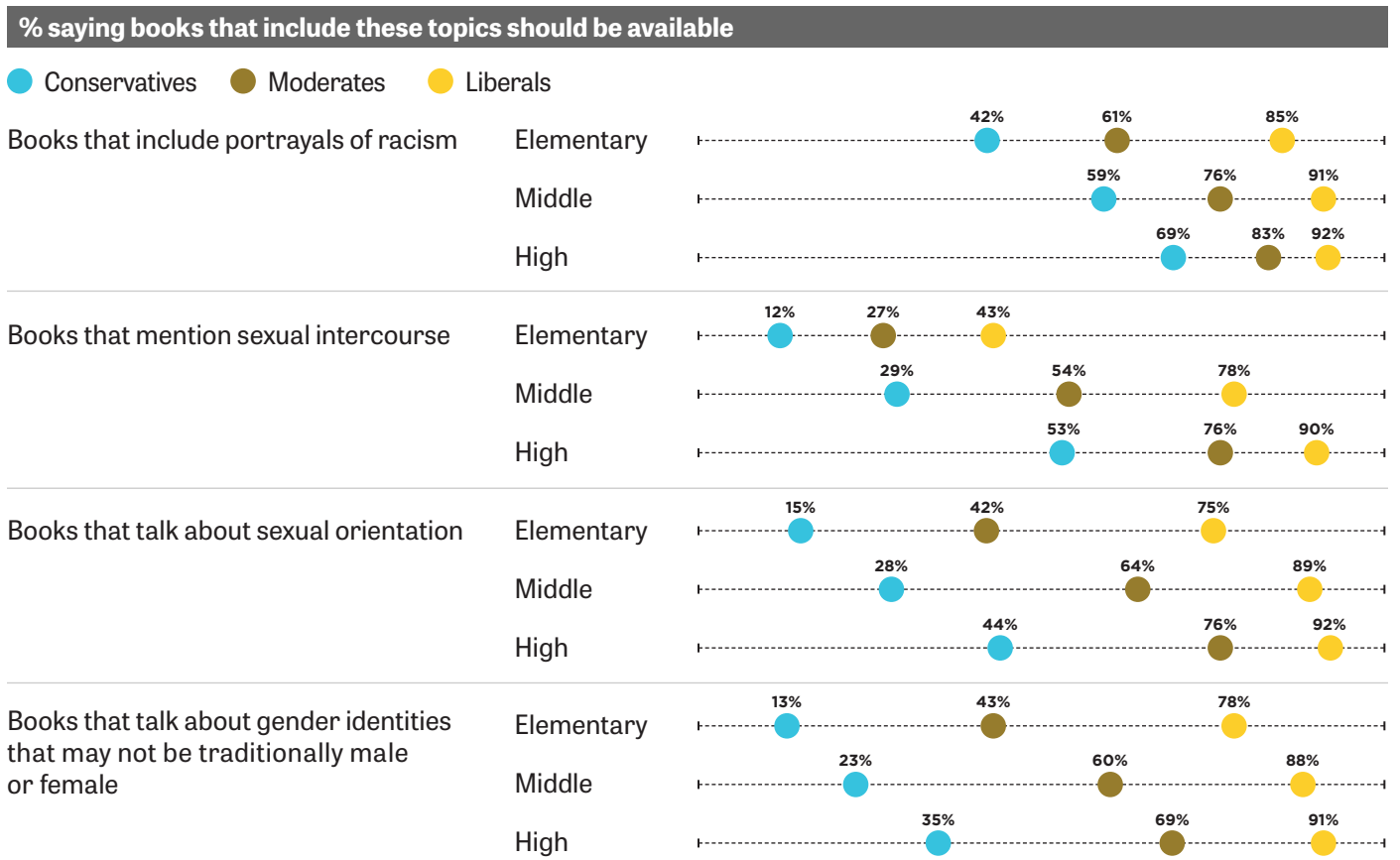
The pattern holds for thinking books that talk about gender identities that may not be traditionally male or female should be available to elementary (43 vs. 29 percent), middle (55 vs. 37 percent) and high (64 vs. 46 percent) school students.

On books that talk about sexual intercourse, public school parents are more apt than non-public school parents to think these should be available for middle (47 vs. 33 percent) and high school (70 vs. 61 percent) students. The two groups are similar on the availability of these books in elementary school.





- Ideology:** There are wide ideological gaps, with liberals far more likely than conservatives to say books that mention any of those three topics (sexual orientation, gender identities and intercourse) should be available. Moderates fall in between. Liberals also are more apt than conservatives to think books portraying racism should be available – at elementary schools, 85 vs. 42 percent; at middle schools, 91 vs. 59 percent; and at high schools, 92 vs. 69 percent, again with moderates in between.<sup>11</sup>
- LGBTQ:** People who identify as LGBTQ are more apt than others to think books that talk about sexual orientation and gender identities should be available across school levels – on gender identities, 70 vs. 40 percent for elementary school students, 79 vs. 53 percent for middle school students and 86 vs. 62 percent for high school students. Gaps are similar for books discussing sexual orientation.



- Race/ethnicity:** When it comes to books with portrayals of racism, across school levels, support is highest among Black people (ranging from 70 percent for elementary school students to 85 percent for high school students) and lowest among Hispanic people (still majorities, 55 to 69 percent).

White people are closer to Hispanic people on the availability of such books to elementary school students (60 percent) and closer to Black people on making books describing racism available to middle school students (75 percent) and those in high schools (82 percent). Asian people are closer to Black people on the availability of such books to elementary (65 percent), middle (73 percent) and high school students (79 percent).

<sup>11</sup> Democrats are more apt than Republicans to think books with each of these types of content should be available across school levels; independents fall in between. Gaps are somewhat narrower by partisanship than by ideology, by 5 to 14 points.



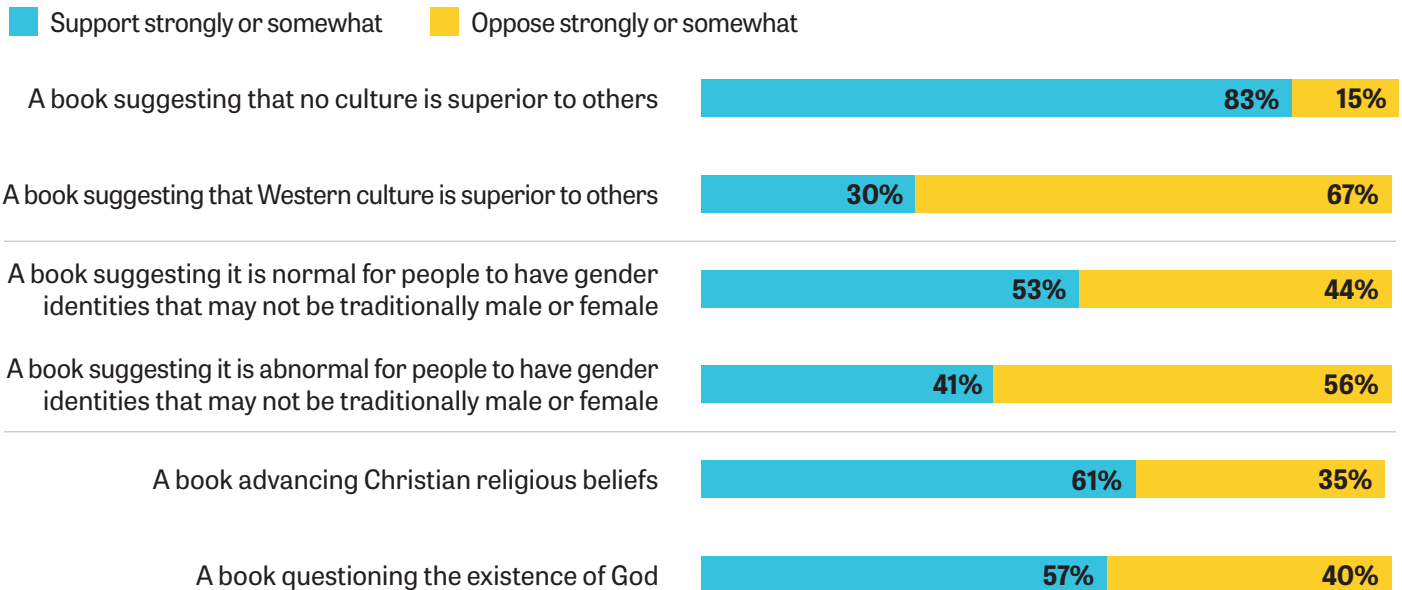
A related question juxtaposed three pairs of contrasting topics, with wide variance based on descriptions of the content. (These questions did not pose a specific school level.)

- Eighty-three percent of adults support the availability of a book suggesting that no culture is superior to others; many fewer, 30 percent, say the same about a book suggesting that Western culture is superior to others.

Strength of sentiment also is skewed: Fifty-four percent strongly support a book saying no culture is superior, with 6 percent strongly opposed. Just 10 percent strongly support a book arguing the superiority of Western culture, with 35 percent strongly opposed.

- Preferences are much closer when it comes to books' discussion of gender identity. Fifty-three percent support the availability of a book suggesting it is normal for people to have gender identities that may not be traditionally male or female, while 41 percent say the same for a book suggesting this is abnormal. Strength of sentiment, in this case, is similar on suggesting it is normal; more strongly oppose (31 percent) than strongly support (17 percent) a book suggesting it is abnormal.
- It is closer still, near parity, on the third pair. Sixty-one percent support the availability of a book advancing Christian religious beliefs, while 57 percent support it for a book questioning the existence of God. Modestly more strongly oppose a book questioning the existence of God (21 percent) than one advancing Christian beliefs (15 percent).

### Views on books being available in a public school library in your community\*



\*Individual items do not total to 100 because of respondents who skipped questions.

All told, these results show how views on book availability grow more layered as details about their content are provided, underscoring the deeply personal nature of these attitudes. Nonetheless, as detailed in Part 3, concerns about depriving students access to books that have educational value outstrip worries about giving them access to inappropriate content.



**Confidence is varied – and often divided – in local public schools to appropriately handle each of seven topics.**

More broadly and not specific to books, the survey asked how confident people are in their local public schools' handling of seven potentially sensitive topics that may be discussed in school books. Results reveal varied public trust in the schools to handle these topics.

About two-thirds are very or somewhat confident in their schools' appropriate handling of the acceptance of differences among people (65 percent) and civics (63 percent). This declines to 58 percent on the subject of moral values, then further, to 53 percent, on how the history of racism affects America today, 51 percent on religious beliefs, 49 percent on political views and 47 percent on issues related to gender and sexuality. Again, as in other measures, confidence on each item is higher among public school parents than others.

Parents' trust in their public school's ability to handle these topics is related to their views on book restriction efforts. Among parents who are confident in their local public schools to handle all seven topics

appropriately, just 32 percent support book restriction efforts. Support rises to 42 percent of parents who are confident in their school to handle four to six of the topics, and to 51 percent of those trusting their school to handle three of the topics or fewer.

Similarly, just 17 percent of parents who are confident in their school's handling of all seven topics are concerned about their child reading an age-inappropriate book from school in the future. It is slightly higher, 23 percent, among those confident on four to six topics, rising to 36 percent of those confident on three or fewer.

Among individual items, liberals are much more apt than conservatives to be confident in their schools' handling of moral values, 71 vs. 43 percent, with moderates closer to liberals, 63 percent. There also are wide ideological gaps in confidence on gender and sexuality issues, political views, religious beliefs and teaching of civics, with moderates in between or closer to liberals on each. Gaps narrow on acceptance of differences among people and how the history of racism affects America today.

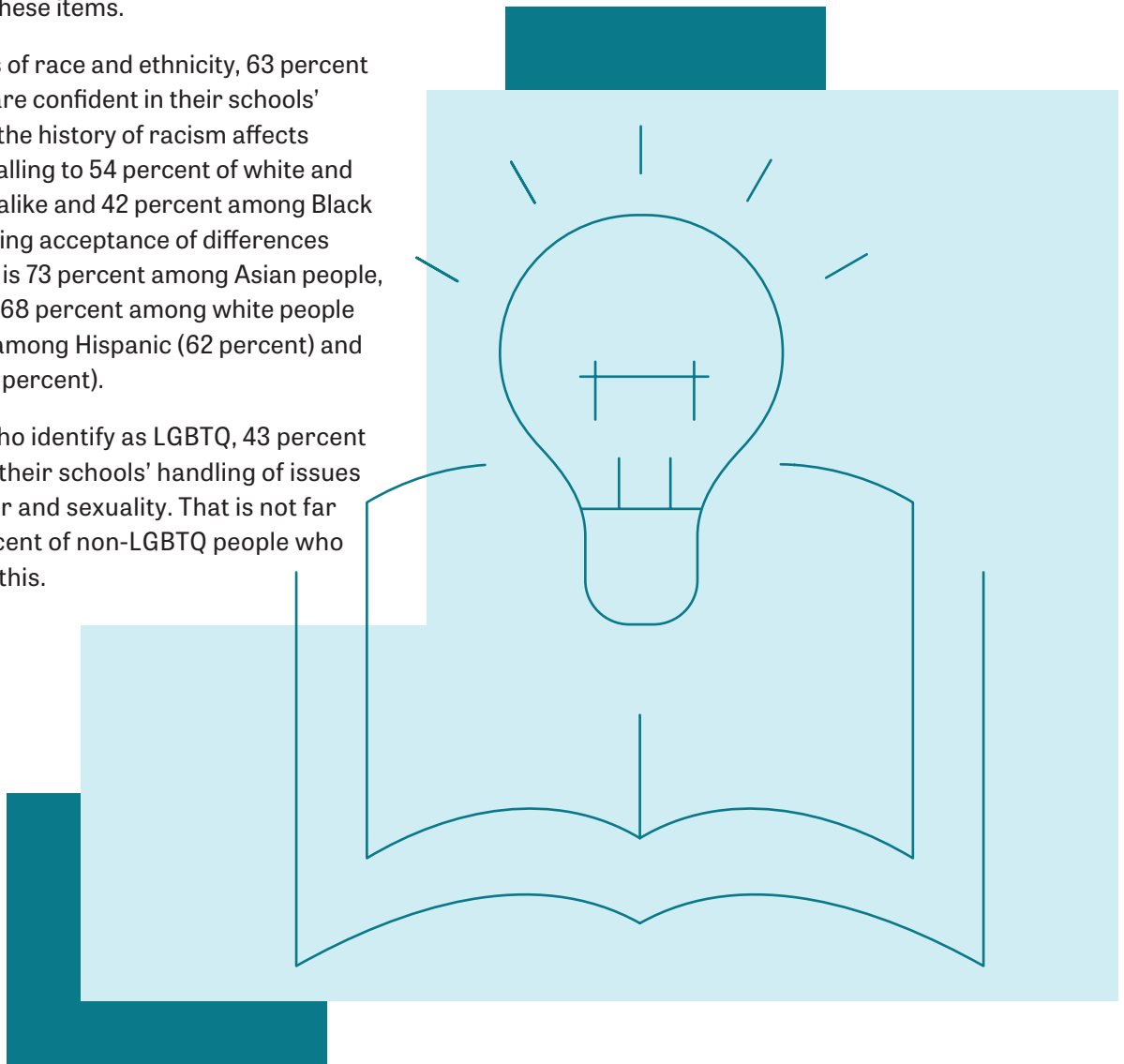
**Confidence in local public schools to handle subjects appropriately**

	All adults	Public school parents	Non-public school parents	Non-parents	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
Acceptance of differences among people	65%	73%	61%	64%	70%	66%	63%
Civics (citizenship, democracy, role of govt.)	63	74	56	61	71	67	53
Moral values	58	68	48	57	71	63	43
How the history of racism affects America today	53	60	50	52	55	56	48
Religious beliefs	51	57	48	50	61	54	41
Political views	49	57	47	48	60	51	39
Issues related to gender and sexuality	47	57	36	46	57	51	36

By partisanship, Democrats are 20 points more apt than Republicans to be confident in schools' handling of moral values, 70 vs. 50 percent; and 15 to 17 points more apt to be confident on gender and sexuality issues, political views, religious beliefs and teaching of civics. Independents are closer to Republicans on these items.

Through the lens of race and ethnicity, 63 percent of Asian people are confident in their schools' handling of how the history of racism affects America today, falling to 54 percent of white and Hispanic people alike and 42 percent among Black people. On handling acceptance of differences among people, it is 73 percent among Asian people, falling slightly to 68 percent among white people and further still among Hispanic (62 percent) and Black people (54 percent).

Among adults who identify as LGBTQ, 43 percent are confident in their schools' handling of issues related to gender and sexuality. That is not far from the 48 percent of non-LGBTQ people who are confident in this.



# Views on the Book Restriction Process and Intellectual Freedom

Part 3 dives deeper into views about the book restriction process, including book complaints, investigations and who should have a say in book decisions. It also explores Americans' views on intellectual freedom and perceptions of how restrictions impact freedom of expression.

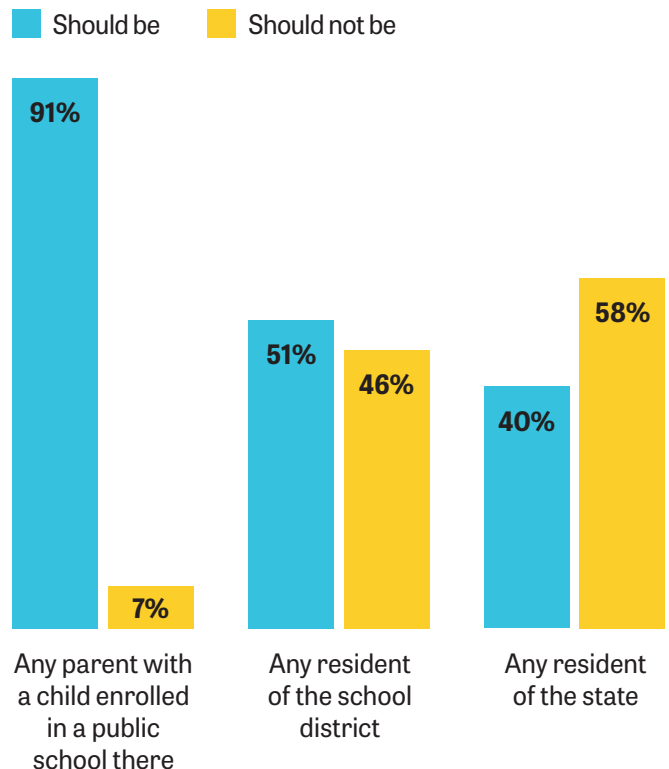
**Views on the book restriction process underscore the issue's complexity. Nonetheless, few people think their state government should have a substantial say in what books should be available, a result that is consistent across ideological groups.**

More people are skeptical than not about the motivations of book restriction proponents. By 55-41 percent, most think that people who bring complaints about books in public schools are more interested in pursuing a political agenda than in protecting children from inappropriate content.

Regardless, the vast majority of adults, 91 percent, say any parent with a child enrolled in a public school should be able to submit a complaint about its available books. Support subsides for extending this to any resident of the school district (51 percent) or of the state (40 percent).

Three-quarters say a single complaint is inadequate to open an investigation of a book; in this group, six complaints is the median number seen as necessary.<sup>12</sup>

**Who should be able to submit a complaint about books available in public schools?\***



\*Individual items do not total to 100 because of respondents who skipped questions.

<sup>12</sup> Responses of up to 10,000 were accepted. The mean response, rather than the median, is 142 complaints, influenced by 67 responses ranging from 1,000 to 10,000.



Americans are divided on whether it is justified to limit book investigations if they divert resources from schools' educational mission. Forty-six percent call this an adequate reason to limit book investigations; 51 percent say it is not. Seventy percent of liberals say it is adequate, vs. 46 percent of moderates and 26 percent of conservatives. It is 60 percent among Democrats, vs. 47 percent of independents and 29 percent of Republicans.

The survey asked how much of a say individual groups should have in the process of deciding what books are available in local public schools. Results generally align with an earlier question about trust in these groups to make decisions about appropriate books. As before, proximity to the classroom is a factor. About two-thirds of adults say public school teachers (65 percent) and

**% thinking each should have a great deal or good amount of say in what books should be available to local public school students**

Public school teachers in your school district	65%
Public school librarians in your school district	64
Parents of public school students in your school district	57
Public school principals in your school district	53
The superintendent and other district-level administrators in your school district	45
The school board in your school district	44
The state government	22
Community members who are not parents of public school students in your school district	21

## 62 percent oppose their state government legislating allowable content in school books.

public school librarians (64 percent) should have a great deal or a good amount of say in this. These are followed by parents of public school students in the district (57 percent), public school principals (53 percent), district-level administrators (45 percent) and the district school board (44 percent).

Following distantly, about two in 10 apiece say the state government (22 percent) or community members who are not parents of public school students in the district (21 percent) should have a great deal or good amount of say in deciding book availability in the schools.

Preference for local control also is evident in who should get the final say: Given the choice between two options, 82 percent think the district's school board should ultimately determine whether a book is available; 15 percent instead think the state government should decide.

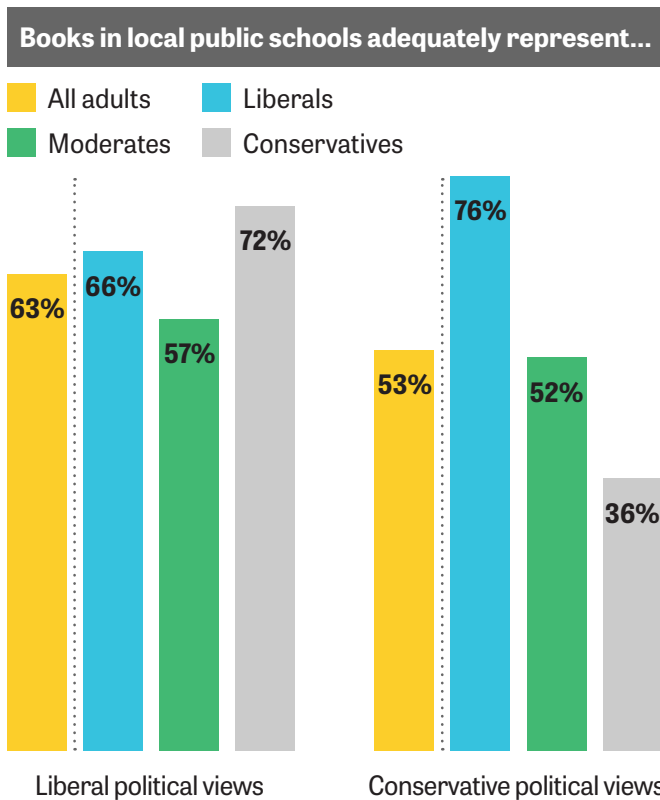
Reflecting low support for book restrictions generally and skepticism toward state government involvement, just 36 percent think states should enact laws on what content is allowed in books in public schools. Sixty-two percent are opposed, again with sharp differences between conservatives (63 percent support) vs. moderates and liberals (32 and 13 percent support, respectively).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Fifty-seven percent of Republicans support such laws, compared with 34 percent of independents and 22 percent of Democrats.



**Further results reveal wide-ranging concerns about book restriction efforts as they relate to students' intellectual freedom. About six in 10, moreover, worry about a chilling effect – schools avoiding some books, despite their educational value, for fear of controversy.**

In terms of ideological sensitivities, more people think the books available in local public schools adequately represent liberal political views (63 percent) than say so about conservative political views (53 percent).



Majorities of conservatives (72 percent), liberals (66 percent) and moderates (57 percent) alike say liberal views are adequately represented. By contrast, just 36 percent of conservatives say the same for conservative views, vs. 52 percent of moderates and 76 percent of liberals.<sup>14</sup>

The survey also gauged views on the concept put forth by the U.S. Supreme Court that the First Amendment includes the right to receive information and ideas, not just to express them.<sup>15</sup> Narrow majorities of the public think efforts to restrict students' access to books threaten the freedom of expression for students (53 percent) and authors (52 percent); it is 48 percent for teachers and 45 percent for school librarians. Those who don't see a threat to the freedom of expression to these groups are a vast 40 to 48 points more apt to support book restriction efforts than those seeing such a threat.

Ideological and partisan gaps on the question are wide. Seventy-two to 82 percent of liberals see such threats, vs. 21 to 28 percent of conservatives. Moderates fall in between, at 47 to 56 percent. The range is 62 to 72 percent among Democrats, 47 to 54 percent among independents and 25 to 32 percent among Republicans.

Public school parents are more likely than non-public school parents to say book restriction efforts threaten the freedom of expression for each of these groups – teachers (47 vs. 34 percent), school librarians (44 vs. 32 percent), students (52 vs. 41 percent) and authors (52 vs. 42 percent). Non-parents are similar to public school parents in these views.

In any case, at all school levels, more people see restricting students' access to books that have educational value as a bigger concern than giving students access to books that are inappropriate for their age. It is a wide 39-point gap for high school students (68-29 percent) and 21 points for middle school students (59-38 percent), narrowing to 7 points for elementary school students (52-45 percent).

Sixty-two percent of Americans express concern about a chilling effect – the possibility that districts may not purchase books with educational value out of fear of complaints about their content. Liberals are far more apt to say so than conservatives (80 vs. 45 percent), with moderates in between, at 65 percent.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Seventy-two percent of Republicans, 61 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of independents think books with liberal political views are adequately represented. That compares with 66 percent of Democrats, 50 percent of independents and 43 percent of Republicans saying the same about books with conservative political views.

<sup>15</sup> See Kim's (2022) discussion of *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* (1982), <https://kappanonline.org/banning-books-unlawful-censorship-discretion-kim/>.

<sup>16</sup> It is 75 percent among Democrats, 49 percent among Republicans and 62 percent among independents.



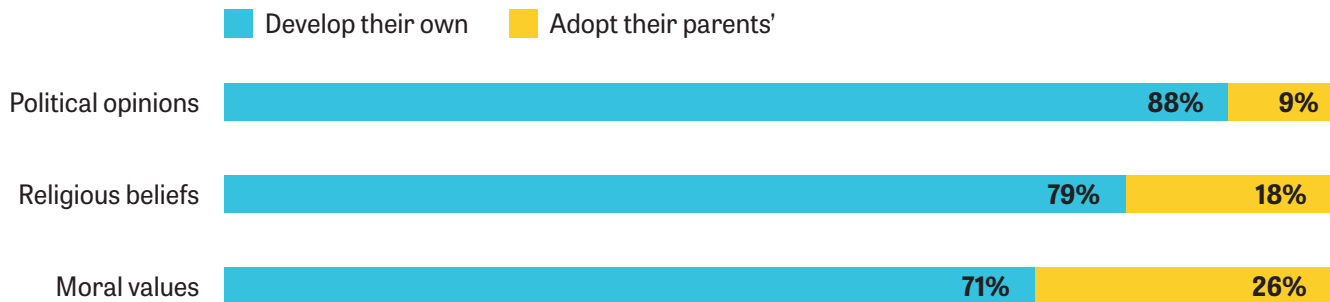


**Substantial majorities of adults value children’s independent thinking as more important than their adopting their parents’ points of view, a view strongly associated with opposition to book restriction efforts.**

In another measure of support for students’ exposure to ideas, by 45 to 79 points, Americans think it is more important for a child to develop their own point of view rather than adopt their parents’ point of view on political opinions (88-9 percent), religious beliefs (79-18 percent) and moral values (71-26 percent).

Strikingly, adults who think it is more important for children to adopt their parents’ point of view on these items are twice as apt as their counterparts to support book restriction efforts, reaching majorities in each case.

**Is it more important for a child to develop their own point of view or adopt their parents’?\***



\*Individual items do not total to 100 because of respondents who skipped questions.

**% saying it is more important for a child to adopt their parents’ point of view**

	Political opinions	Religious beliefs	Moral values
<b>All</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>26%</b>
Conservatives	15	30	39
Moderates	8	17	25
Liberals	4	8	13
White evangelical Protestants	13	27	35
Not white evangelical Protestants	8	17	25

Conservatives are more likely than liberals to think children should adopt their parents’ point of view on each, with moderates in between.<sup>17</sup> White evangelical Protestants are 10 points more apt than their counterparts to think it is more important for a child to adopt their parents’ point of view on moral values and religious beliefs, narrowing on political opinions.

Differences among groups also are apparent in responses to an open-ended question on the issue of book restrictions, explored in the next section.

<sup>17</sup> Partisan gaps are somewhat narrower on these items, with independents closer to Democrats on each: moral values (38 percent among Republicans, 23 percent among independents and 20 percent among Democrats), religious beliefs (29 percent among Republicans, 15 percent among independents and 14 percent among Democrats) and political opinions (14 percent among Republicans, 8 percent among independents and 6 percent among Democrats).



# In Their Own Words

Survey respondents were invited to share, in their own words, what comes to mind when they hear about efforts to restrict students' access to books in public schools. More than 3,000 offered substantive comments, a selection of which are presented here.

Many answers revealed deep emotion, ranging from concerns about fundamental rights to expressions of outright intolerance. Answers reveal how ideology, partisanship and personal values inform views about restriction efforts – and how deeply divisions run.

Among the majority that opposes book restrictions, many suggested that such efforts could erode democracy by curtailing access to ideas.



Restricting access to books is about restricting access to ideas and free thought. It is fascist and unpatriotic. We should teach critical thinking skills to evaluate ideas and truth.



Que entre más acceso tengan nuestros jóvenes a la información es mejor pienso que la información es conocimiento y el conocimiento es poder. [The more access our young people have to information, the better. I think that information is knowledge and knowledge is power.]

“ Sounds like a sci-fi story in which society becomes terrible and terrible people take control of the community/country.

“ I immediately think of historical book bans and all the discrimination and atrocities that followed. These tactics will no doubt lead down the same path.

“ Once you start banning books, where will it stop?

Similarly, more than 200 responses used the term “censorship” explicitly, about three dozen referenced the dystopian novels “1984” by George Orwell or “Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury and more than 100 used the terms “Nazi” or “fascism.”

Several cast their objections in political or ideological light.

“ I think of Republicans trying to prevent children from learning about race, gender, and sexuality.

“ It’s all fake, manufactured outrage - it’s a right-wing ideological takeover of our schools.

“ These efforts sound like the actions of right-wing extremists who want to restrict education and access to information in order to inhibit students’ critical thinking so they will more easily conform to the extremist ideology.

Others expressed a more specific concern that book restrictions silence Black and LGBTQ histories.



The biggest thing that comes to mind is erasure. Whether it be of the United States' past, LGBTQ+ topics, or something that people find as equally controversial, it's all about erasure when it comes to book banning and restriction.



It's a way to keep white students from learning about the history of this country and the way Black people were treated.



Banning books is the effort of religious groups to control the minds of students. Gay and Black experiences need to be shared.

Some respondents specifically saw restrictions as necessary pushback against liberal and "woke" culture.



Two sides to the coin. Dirty woke liberals banning moral, ethical etc. books vs. normal people banning immoral, disgusting etc. books that have ruined society and still make it even worse.



Concerned parents are pushing back on the left's woke agenda to indoctrinate the children.



Depends on the restricting. If restricting for "offensive" content, I think it's silly. If you mean restricting as in restricting elementary children from reading "woke" content, then I'm all for it.



Restrict the woke books that try to normalize things that are not as God intended.

Other comments demonstrated how opposition to book restrictions can cut across ideological lines or depend on the content. Some saw attempts at banning “classics” as unsavory while generally supporting restrictions on other material.

“ They just better not restrict access to the Bible.

“ There are so many classics kids need to know about and learn. They should be aware of the acceptable verbiage if non-politically correct/derogatory words are used.

“ Books like ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ ‘Catcher in the Rye’ all need to be made available to students. Just because the far-left liberals think all things not woke need to be banned, the students will miss out on learning about the culture and history of this country. These classic literatures need to stay in the curriculum.

While many wholly opposed book restrictions, a large group expressed support for limiting access to certain books. Many of them said constraints were needed to protect students from sexually explicit or otherwise age-inappropriate materials.

“ Some books that are written are NOT appropriate for young minds! Anybody can write a book about any subject sometimes misinforming or saying untrue facts and misleading naive minds.

“ Libraries need to keep this trash out of children’s hands. The kids will learn enough about perverted crap as they get to adulthood themselves, usually online at porn sites. No need for garbage books in a public or school library.

“ Not all books are appropriate. Oversexualized, overly violent, offensive language, extreme peril for children, this content is inappropriate in the same way that we categorize television shows or movies.

More than 50 responses in this vein referred to banning materials explicitly because they discussed transgender and queer identity; many more mentioned such topics as top-of-mind without elaboration.



Pornography and trans propaganda should be illegal.



I don't want any graphic, strong language content, fighting or gay/transgender rights read by my child.

Some argued that widespread access to the internet renders most restrictions toothless.



Overall, a pointless exercise given every child has access to Google.



Para mí es absurdo que algunos padres estén pidiendo la restringir algunos libros, si los muchachos de todas maneras se meten al Internet a buscar información que no son adecuadas para su edad. [To me it is absurd that some parents are asking to restrict some books, if children still go on the internet to look for information that is not appropriate for their age.]



Children are exposed to substantially more inappropriate content every day on the cell phones these concerned parents provide them. The days of being exposed to inappropriate content through a book are long past us.

Some respondents spoke to who should decide what students could read, with divisions among them. Several felt that parents should be the ultimate deciders, with a few saying they distrusted schools to make good choices.

“The schools are trying to take the parents' place.”

“Age-appropriate content should be the rule. I would not trust today's upper echelon in education or libraries to make that call. Especially in this state.”

“I'm glad parents are taking an interest in what is happening in their child's life. Parents have every right to restrict access to materials they don't feel are appropriate to their child.”

Others were more confident in schools' ability to define appropriateness and felt that the role of parents was to guide children through difficult material.

“People need to realize that kids will be exposed to everything whether parents try to hide it or not. Better to expose kids to everything so teachers and parents can have an open and honest discussion about things.”

“My parents never censored my reading. All reading is good reading.”

“Teachers and librarians study education and have a good idea what students should or should not read. Parents have no clue and are usually ruled by emotion or because someone told them to do this.”



# Conclusions

To our knowledge, no previous probability-based public opinion survey has delved so deeply into the complexity of public attitudes on efforts to restrict students' access to books in the nation's public schools.<sup>18</sup> Given the breadth of such efforts, this independent, nonpartisan research fills a critical gap in our understanding of how the American public views the book restriction movement. Those responses are at once lopsided, yet nuanced; and they carry within them deep divisions, particularly across ideological groups.

While this report offers considerable details, opportunities for further research remain. The study's unusually large sample size provides for analyzable groups of LGBTQ people, public school teachers, and public and non-public school parents, among others, offering rare chances to better understand the attitudes and experiences of comparatively small populations. It includes measures of proximity to public schools, civic engagement, news consumption and personal reading habits that offer additional analytical possibilities, including through statistical modeling. And thousands of open-ended responses offer rich opportunities for additional qualitative analysis.

At their base, results show that the public broadly opposes book restrictions in the schools, expresses confidence in the schools to select appropriate books and sees a bigger risk in depriving students of access to books with educational value than in giving them access to books that are inappropriate. Fears about a chilling effect in book selection are substantial.

Yet there are complexities in these views. Age appropriateness is a real concern, and objections to some content rise for lower grade levels. There is a sense – particularly among conservative Americans – that schoolbooks underrepresent the views of conservatives. No single group has clear majority trust to select age-appropriate books, suggesting the wisdom of a collaborative approach. And public school parents are modestly more apt than non-parents to support book restriction efforts, despite higher confidence in their local public schools' book selection.

Strikingly, while most Americans call the issue important, experience of students' exposure to problematic material in schoolbooks is very limited, reported by just 7 percent of K-12 parents. And the survey finds minimal participation in book restriction efforts at the individual level. Yet the impact of that participation is highly amplified, with nearly one in four adults aware of book restriction efforts in their community, and just more than half of them saying restrictions in fact were put in place.

The issue raises fundamental concerns about free expression; those who see threats to freedom of expression are especially apt to oppose book restrictions. And it cuts to basic world views, with sharp divisions based on views of individualism vs. parental influence in child development.

<sup>18</sup> See the desk review of previous research in the supplement to this report, at <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/americans-views-on-book-restrictions-in-u-s-public-schools-2024/>



# Methodology Summary

This survey was produced for the Knight Foundation by Langer Research Associates. Data collection was conducted via the nationally representative Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, in which participants are randomly recruited via address-based sampling to respond to survey questionnaires online. Households without internet connections are provided with a web-enabled device and service.

The survey was designed to include approximately 4,000 adults from the general population and oversamples to at least 150 Asian pre-K-12 parents, 150 Black pre-K-12 parents and 150 Hispanic pre-K-12 parents.

The questionnaire, in English and Spanish, was pretested Feb. 23-26, 2024, and field work was conducted Feb. 29-March 10. After initial invitations, reminder emails were sent on the fourth and seventh days of the field period. Out of 7,165 panel members invited to participate, 4,622 responded. Participants completed the survey in a median time of 18 minutes.

Quality control flagged respondents who skipped all questions (9), and, of the remainder, who completed the survey in the 1 percent fastest times (46). Fifty-five cases were removed from the dataset, resulting in a final sample of 4,567 adults, including 1,413 parents of children age 18 or younger.

Data were weighted via iterative proportional fitting to benchmark distributions of general population adults from the U.S. Census Bureau's March 2023 Current Population Survey and 2022 American Community Survey.

Please see the separate supplemental report for full methodological details.

