

Back to school, back to battle

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By Yvonne Abraham Globe Columnist, Updated September 6, 2023, 6:06 p.m. Email to a Friend Share on Facebook Share on Twitter Print this Article View Comments 35



In this America, back to school means back to battle, as the national war over what our kids learn grows uglier and more intense.

The wave of conservative efforts to control what students are taught and what books they can read — part of Republican attempts to goose turnout among suburban voters — is lapping on even our progressive shores.

From conservative activist Chris Rufo, who almost single-handedly manufactured the hysteria over so-called critical race theory, to Donald Trump adviser Steve Bannon, who proclaimed “the path to save the nation” goes “through the school boards,” the party has made no bones about the strategy here. Its outrage machine is fueled by groups like Parents Defending Education, Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, and the Mass Family Institute — supposedly grass-roots operations, but connected to national networks and well-funded GOP power players — which target teachers and librarians across the country, and have captured control of education policy in some states, including Florida.

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According to [the American Library Association](#), there were at least 1,269 attempts across the country to censor library books and resources in 2022, almost double the attempts in 2021.

But get this: In Massachusetts, one of the knowledge-economy capitals of the country, there were at least 45 such attempts last year, targeting some 57 books.

Debates over restricting access to certain books — mostly those that deal with racism, sexuality, and gender — have animated local races in some parts of the state, including the South Coast. In Rochester, for example, two School Committee members who parroted the national talking points won reelection in May, with help from the archconservative Christian Mass Family Institute, [according to The New Bedford Light](#). The ongoing [School Committee contest in Attleboro](#) is also turning on whether schools should restrict access to books conservatives find objectionable.

No ban has yet succeeded here, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts. But the battles still take a toll.

“It is very demoralizing,” said Jennifer Varney, an elementary school librarian who was until recently president of the Massachusetts School Library Association, which represents some 700 librarians in schools across the Commonwealth. “It’s very discouraging getting your professionalism questioned and attacked.”

Parents have long had reservations about certain books, said Barb Fecteau, the association’s current president. Until recently, it was possible to talk rationally about them.

“Now it’s not civil, it’s ugly,” said the high school librarian. “Words like ‘pedophile’ and ‘groomer’ get thrown around,” and her colleagues have had to take down their social media accounts “because people who have been embroiled in these things have had their lives upended.”

She and other librarians are fine with restricting access to certain books for kids whose parents request it. But this isn’t that.

“If a parent says, ‘I really don’t want my kid reading that book,’ we will say ‘OK’ and give your kid a different book,” Varney said. “But when you say, ‘I don’t think anyone in that school should be allowed to read that book,’ that’s crossing a line.”

It’s also taking time away from the important work librarians do to educate kids in media literacy and other skills that are now vital. And it has a chilling effect, the librarians said.

“Whether or not you want to, you find yourself second-guessing your book purchases and what you put on display,” Varney said. “Am I ready for the pushback?”

This year, however, they're getting a little help. The ACLU has designed a Back to School toolkit to educate students, teachers, and parents about kids' right to learn free from censorship and discrimination, and to push back on bans. And state Senator Julian Cyr, a Truro Democrat, has filed legislation that would make it harder to ban books here and would protect librarians from political interference.

Fundamentally, Mass Family Institute and the other throwback outfits have to know their efforts are futile when it comes to restricting access to content they find objectionable: All of the kids they say they're trying to protect carry the whole universe around in the palms of their hands. Endless discussions of race, gender, and sexuality are available every time they pick up their phones.

Then again, the book wars aren't really about protecting kids. They are about protecting certain adults' power.
