

Newest US Export: Censorship?

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February 18, 2023

By Fiona Tapp

It's a trend that has been on the rise in the U.S. for several years.

In 2022, there were 137 gag order bills introduced in 36 state legislatures that sought to limit what materials could be taught or made available in public schools and libraries. And, like so many American trends, this one has become popular elsewhere in the world.

Gag orders in American education have struck down or attempted to censor materials that dealt with race, gender, sexuality and American history, in K through 12 classrooms as well as in public universities. PEN America, a free speech organization, compiles weekly lists of these bills in its Index of Educational Gag Orders. When such orders are passed, teachers can be fined or face criminal charges if they continue to use the material in question or discuss banned ideas.

Thanks to Florida's "Parental Rights in Education" law — commonly known as "Don't Say Gay" — it is prohibited in that state for public school teachers in kindergarten through third-grade classrooms to provide "instruction" on sexual orientation or gender identity.

It seems this prohibition holds appeal for political leaders elsewhere in the world, as such censorship is now surfacing in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. What are they trying to ban — and why?

Australia

In Australia in 2021, the senate voted against including critical race theory in the country's school curriculum. Critical race theory, or CRT, holds that racism is built into western economic and political systems, and therefore is a systemic issue. (In the U.S., CRT has been a target in many attempts to censor educational materials and even entire curricula.) Australia's move appears to have been an effort to bar students from studying the legacy of colonialism.

Despite the vote in its legislature, Australia's senate does not actually have the power to determine school curricula. Meanwhile, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority — which does have that power — didn't mention CRT when it drafted its national curriculum.

It seems that the senate's move was an exercise in political rhetoric, rather than an attempt to change policy. But political rhetoric often precedes policy change, so we'll be watching how this debate unfolds in Australia.

Canada

In the [Durham Catholic District School Board](#) in Ontario, school trustees and parents objected to the terms white supremacy, microaggression and reparation in a proposed anti-racism policy. These words were then removed in an amended version of the policy, as was explicit mention of colonialism.

However, following backlash from the community, the school board issued an [apology](#) and said it would be working with the Anti-Black Racism and Black Excellence Advisory Committee to create a forum for further discussion. The initial draft of the anti-racism policy was reinstated.

In another part of Ontario, a motion was raised at a meeting of the [Waterloo Region District School Board](#) to request that teachers prepare a presentation defining CRT and white privilege before these terms were used in class. Trustee Cindy Watson, who brought the motion, also requested that educators support white children if they “internalize guilt and shame.” The school board confirmed that CRT is not taught to grade-school-age children in their schools, and voted down the proposal.

United Kingdom

In 2003, the U.K. government abolished its Section 28 law, which had forbidden teachers from “promoting homosexuality.” Today, however, policies that seek to prevent discussion of homosexuality are on the rise. Gay author [Simon James Green](#) was banned from visiting a Catholic school in south London, while there has also been an uproar about drag queens reading to children in libraries.

Despite these controversies, education censorship is unlikely to take root in the U.K. in the same way that it has in the U.S., where elected officials control the purse strings on school funding. Such officials can, in essence, hold districts and individual schools to ransom. In the U.K. as well as in Canada, school leaders — not elected officials — determine what to teach in order to meet students’ needs.

Back Stateside ...

[EveryLibrary](#) is a national political action committee dedicated to libraries, and it supports free access to books of all kinds. According to executive director John Chrastka, “Any parent can decide that a book is inappropriate or appropriate for their child. It is a core role and right of a parent to make that decision. But the relevance of a book to the curriculum and to educational standards is established by professional librarians and educators.”

Explicitly teaching children critical thinking skills protects them from the very indoctrination that campaigners for school censorship seem to fear, says Ken Kunz, president of the International Literacy Association. He says that moves to ban or remove materials from schools only hurt children.

“We are a globally connected community with diverse cultures, experiences, and worldviews,” Kunz says. He adds that, “Being able to respectfully, collaboratively and empathetically participate in such communities requires background knowledge,” as well as an ability to tolerate the discomfort of different ideas or difficult history.

Chrastka notes that the current moves toward censorship are connected to an old and unsavory history.

“Limiting access to information, curtailing exposure to ideas, and diminishing opportunities to discover have never been best practices in education — or in civil society,” Chrastka says. “The political regimes that practice censorship find themselves on the wrong side of history.”