ARE PUBLIC ATTITUDES CHANGING?

Trends in Public Opinion Regarding Access to Sexual Content in Schools and Libraries

Robin G. Shader

Director of the Northwest Regional Library System, serving Bay, Gulf, and Liberty counties, FL, and doctoral student in the Public Administration program at Valdosta State University, GA.

Access to certain subject matter in public schools and libraries has recently become a more hotly debated issue. Between 2021 and 2023, 16 Republican-led states have used state legislation, executive orders by governors, or actions by state boards of education to limit discussions of sensitive or controversial topics in schools, specifically critical race theory and LGBTQ issues.[1] Florida is one of the states where new laws have mandated changes to how teachers teach, what they can discuss with students, and which books students can access in schools. The Parental Rights in Education Act (2022), often referred to as "The Don't Say Gay Bill," and the 2023 expansion are two examples of Florida laws aimed at increasing parents' rights to control the care and upbringing, including the education, of their children. While the changes mandated by these Florida laws have, arguably, increased information sharing between school staff and parents, and transparency related to the books and subject matter available to children in schools, they also have unintended consequences that may violate the constitutional rights of children and parents, and result in harm to vulnerable students.

Threats Against Schools, Librarians, and Teachers

Reaction to the availability of divisive content in school libraries has included extreme and hostile behavior. Louisiana School Librarian Amanda Jones received a death threat after she spoke publicly in support of the importance of providing a diverse collection of reading material to students. Other librarians have admitted that they no longer feel safe in their jobs.[2] In 2023, after a post from the "Libs of TikTok" social media account claiming an Iowa middle school had a book that "teaches kids about gay sex," a bomb threat was called in to the school.[3] Teachers are also losing their jobs over violations of these new laws and policies. For example, Melissa Calhoun, a teacher in Brevard County, Florida lost her job after using a student's preferred name without parental permission.[4] During the June 4, 2025 Florida State Board of Education meeting, a board member was incredulous that books with sexual content had ever made it onto library shelves and asked Superintendent Ayers of Hillsborough County schools, "Have you considered firing all your media specialists and starting from scratch?"[5] The threat of termination, criminal prosecution, or violence for allowing "pornography" in schools will likely have a long-lasting effect on which materials are removed or selected for school collections. Is this really what the public wants?

What Do Americans Think Today About What Children Should Learn in School?

Despite the removal of content deemed controversial in schools, polls of Americans indicate that the majority do not support such changes. A 2022 poll of 1,030 people conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that only 12 percent of respondents favored "Prohibiting books about divisive topics being taught in schools," and only 21 percent favored "Prohibiting teachers from teaching about sex and sexuality in schools."[6]

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The Understanding America Study (UAS), conducted by the University of Southern California, surveyed 3,751 Americans about what should be taught in schools. The UAS shows overwhelming bipartisan support for controversial subject discussion at the high school level, and significant support for many controversial topics at the elementary level.[7] Additionally, the survey revealed that most Americans do not know what is being taught in schools; they do not know very much (if anything) about critical race theory, and those who have objections to certain subjects being taught at the elementary level indicated that they do not believe those topics are actually taught.[8] The UAS found that while Democrats have more support for students learning about controversial issues in school generally, there is agreement by the majority of both Democrats and Republicans that high school students should be taught and have access to read books on controversial topics, but there should be limits on assigned and leisure reading of some controversial topics in elementary school.[9]

The Knight Foundation's Americans' Views on Book Restriction in U.S. Public Schools 2024 surveyed 4,500 adults in February and March 2024, and found that two-thirds of Americans surveyed are opposed to the restriction of books in public schools, and 78 percent of adults surveyed, and 88 percent of public school parents, are confident that school staff are selecting appropriate books.[10]

Trends in American Attitudes About LGBTQ+ Subjects Generally and in Libraries

Those surveys provide a snapshot of American attitudes today, but do not explain trends in public opinion. Are attitudes shifting? The General Social Survey (GSS) is a project of NORC at the University of Chicago, and funded by the National Science Foundation.[11] The GSS has been surveying Americans about societal issues since 1972, and GSS data has been used in numerous studies researching attitudes about issues listed as controversial. For example, data from the GSS between 1988 and 2010 was used to track changes in opinion about whether homosexuals should have the right to marry. Results indicated that public opinion became more supportive of same-sex marriage over time due to societal change.[12]

Another study examined GSS data about attitudes about homosexual materials in public libraries between 1973 and 2006, and concluded that the public had become less conservative in their views, with most believing gay-themed books should remain in public libraries, even if the respondents themselves felt homosexuality was wrong.[13] Similar to the study on gay marriage attitudes, the study of gay-themed library books found that acceptance was due to societal change. Based on GSS data, in 2006, only 25 percent of American adults over the age of 18 felt gay-themed books should be removed from public libraries.[14] In a 2010 study, the researcher confirmed that attitudes about having books in the library with positive portrayals of homosexuals had become more acceptable.[15]

To examine more recent attitudes about sexual content and LGBTQ+ themes in schools, GSS survey response trends from two questions were analyzed:

1. Should books about homosexuals be removed from public libraries?
2. Would you be for or against sex education in the public schools?

Books About Homosexuals in Public Libraries

The GSS asks respondents whether a book about homosexuals, written by a homosexual, should be removed from a public library. The data was cleaned to remove non-responses. Fig. 1 displays results from each survey year between 2012 and 2021, and shows that the percentage of people who believe such a book should be removed is steadily decreasing.[16] This question did not appear in the surveys conducted in 2022 and 2024.

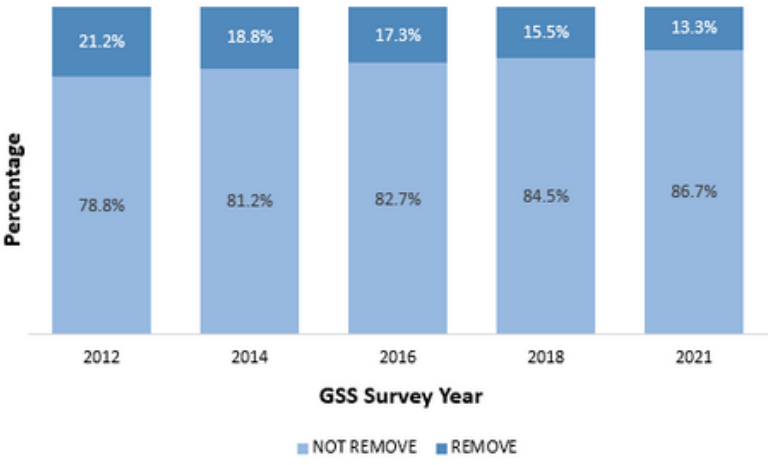

Fig. 1. Should a book about Homosexuality be Removed from the Public Library? Response Percentages, General Social Survey, 2012-2021.

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Support for Teaching Sex Education in Public Schools

The GSS asked: "Would you be for or against sex education in the public schools?" This question has been included in the GSS every year it was offered since 1974, so the results of 28 surveys are available for study.[17] Respondents who did not answer the question were removed from the analysis. Between the period 1974 and 2024, the highest disapproval percentage was 21 percent in both 1975 and 1977. Fig. 2 shows the results between 2012 and 2024. While there does appear to be a slight decline in support and a slight increase in opposition over this period, an overwhelming majority of survey respondents support teaching sex education in schools. In 2024, 87.1 percent of Americans supported teaching sex education, while only 12.9 percent opposed.

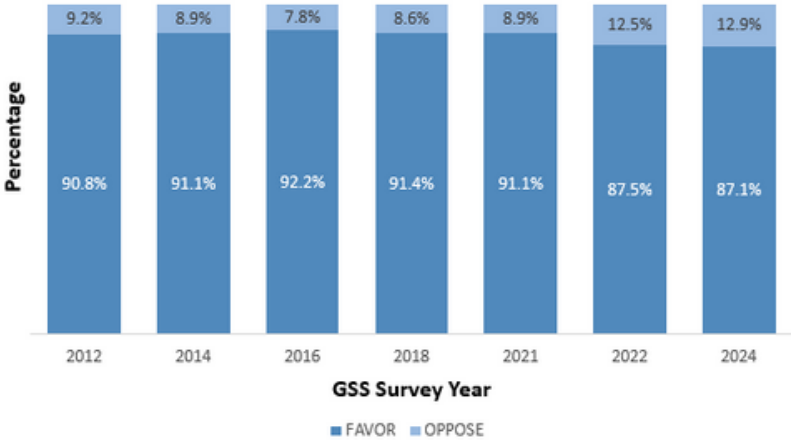

Fig. 2. Do You Favor or Oppose Sex Education in Schools? Response Percentages: General Social Survey, 2012 – 2024.

Since much of the legislation restricting school curriculum has been advanced in Republican-led states, an analysis of respondents' political party affiliation was conducted to determine if the increased opposition to sex education in schools varies by party. Data from respondents who did not identify a political party were removed. Fig. 3 shows the breakdown of respondents who oppose teaching sex education in school in the four surveys conducted from 2018 to 2024. Respondents who self-identified as Democrat or Democrat-leaning Independent were grouped into the Democrat group, and self-identified Republican or Republican-leaning Independents were combined into the Republican group. Fig. 3 shows that Democrats are the least opposed and Republicans are the group with the greatest opposition.

In 2024, 22.3 percent of respondents who self-identified as either Republican or Republican-leaning Independents (163 people) were opposed to sex education in school, and 76.7 percent (569 people) within that same political affiliation were in favor.

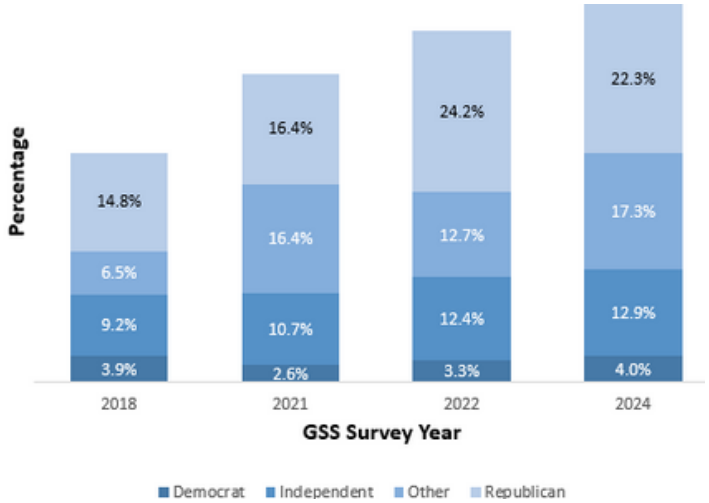

Fig. 3. Do You Favor or Oppose Sex Education in Schools? Percentage of Respondents Who Oppose by Political Affiliation: General Social Survey, 2018 – 2024.

Values and Politics

The Parental Rights in Education Act (2022) and related legislation have the stated goal of supporting parents' rights to control the education of their children, but the result is that only some parents are controlling what information all students can access. There are strong views for and against allowing controversial materials in schools and libraries, which is why school board meetings are often contentious. Research shows that when individuals have morally convicted attitudes about specific topics, it can encourage them to become more politically engaged and can also spark negative emotions, creating hostile feelings toward those who support the opposing viewpoint.[18] Based on research by Clifford et al., rhetoric that negatively frames the existence of books about sexuality or gender identity in schools will be most persuasive in people who already support that point of view.[19] A recent Hillsborough County school board meeting provided a glimpse of the passionate opinions on both sides of the issue. The lengthy public comment period included multiple calls to remove "inappropriate," "sexually explicit," and "pornographic" materials from schools. As one commenter stated, "This is not a debate about censorship or freedom of expression. This is about protecting minors from content that is not only harmful, but also explicitly prohibited by state law."[20]

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The next speaker expressed concern about the transparency of the book removal process after hundreds of books were removed without following the existing review process. “As a parent, I find this concerning. Public school parents ought to be able to see what is being removed and to have a say as to whether or not these books are inappropriate for our own children.”[21]

Florida school districts are under pressure to remove books that political appointees consider pornographic. During their June 4, 2025, meeting, Florida State Board of Education members were clear that criminal charges should be brought against school district board members or employees if they do not remove materials that violate state statute. It is within this contentious political and cultural environment that librarians need to try to adequately meet the needs of students while following laws and procedures that might be contrary to professional ethics and which violate individual rights granted by the U.S. Constitution.

Conclusion

This article examines public opinion and finds that, despite increased rhetoric and debate on the availability of divisive content in schools, the majority of Americans support access to diverse instruction and materials in public schools. Research suggests that public policy is not based on public opinion but, rather, is influenced by organized interest groups.[22] In Florida and other states, successful advocacy efforts have changed what and how teachers teach and the books that students can access in public schools. Lawsuits have challenged the constitutionality of curriculum restrictions and book removals, and there have been successes. For example, in August 2025, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida sided with plaintiffs on seven counts included in their lawsuit against Parental Rights in Education (HB 1069), claiming “The state’s prohibition of material that ‘describes sexual conduct’ is overbroad and unconstitutional.”[23] An attorney for the Florida State Board of Education stated they would appeal the decision.[24]

Upholding professional standards and ethics in this politically polarized environment may be a challenge, but, according to recent polls and selected GSS trend data, the majority of Americans remain supportive of the freedom to read, learn, and consider all points of view.

Endnotes

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