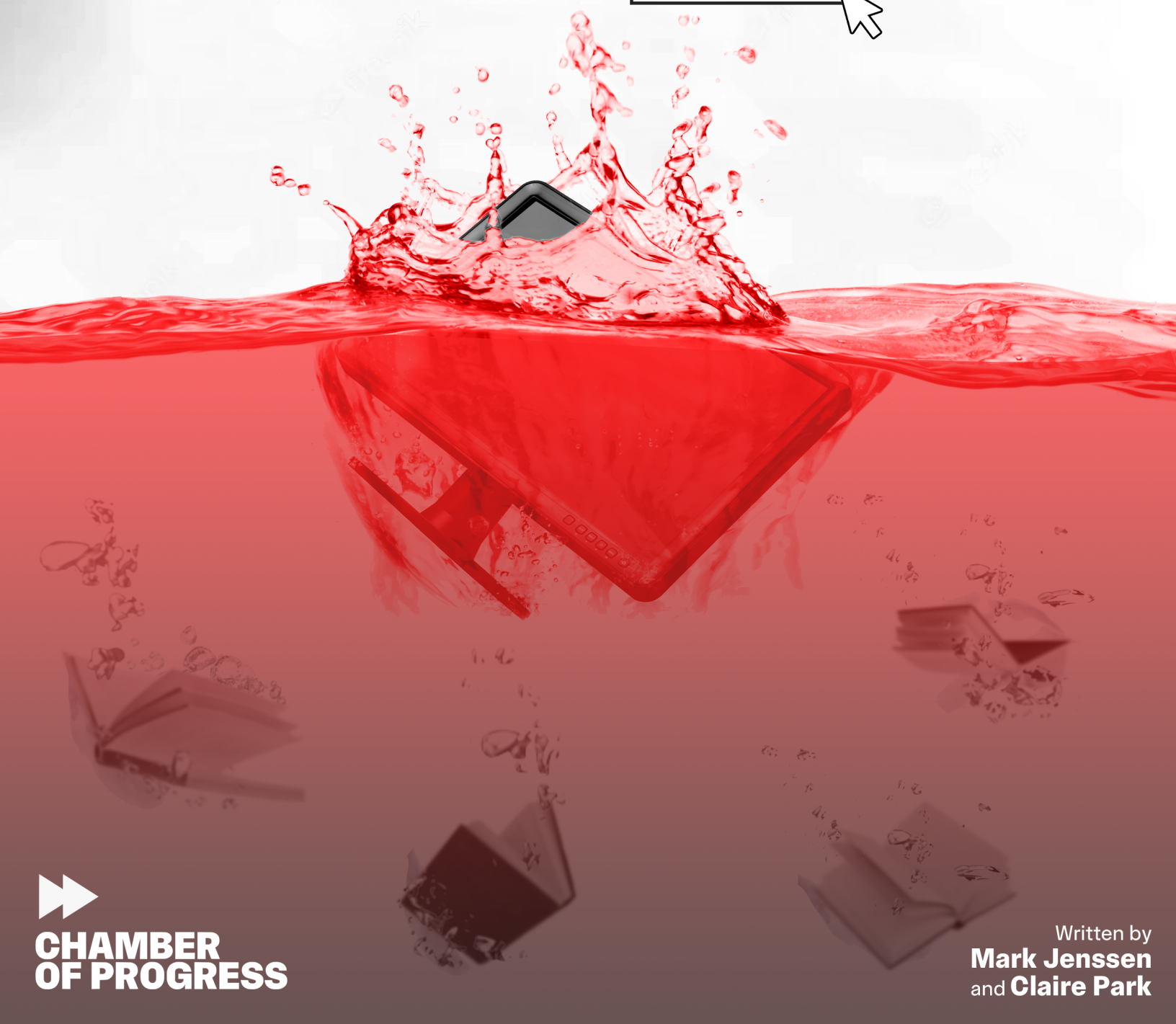


THE RISING RED TIDE OF DIGITAL CENSORSHIP:

How a Conservative Wave of Content Bans is Moving from

Schools to **ONLINE**



00

Executive Summary

- ▶ **Children and teens' access to information is under assault by right-wing lawmakers across the country.**
 - Curriculum censorship laws and local book bans are proliferating in America, with 38 censorship laws enacted since 2022 that seek to restrict access to specific content in classrooms and libraries, and nearly 1,500 recorded individual book bans.
 - Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana are among the leaders in banning books and enacting curriculum censorship, accounting for 31% of censorship laws since last year and 40% of book bans in 2022.

- ▶ **The movement to censor what students see in schools has moved online.**
 - Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana have all enacted legislation seeking to limit teens' access to information on the Internet using the same specious justifications underlying the curriculum censorship movement.
 - Conservative legislators in other states are beginning to follow suit, explicitly modeling their bills after laws in Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

- ▶ **The same elected officials, the same advocacy groups, and the same legislatures pushing curriculum censorship agendas are leading the movement to limit teens' access to information on the Internet.**
 - An examination of the major players in the curriculum censorship movement reveals deep ties between extremists fighting to ban information in school and those pushing for digital censorship legislation.
 - Both curriculum censorship and digital censorship efforts share common language in legislative texts and testimonies, often targeting LGBTQ+ and anti-racist content.
 - The same states pushing hardest for censorship in classrooms are seeking to limit the availability of specific content online – content that provides crucial affirmation and support to LGBTQ+ youth and other marginalized teens.

▶ **For a generation of young people growing up in states with book bans and digital censorship, the combined effects of conservative censorship regimes could prove disastrous.**

- For children and teens – particularly for those at risk of abuse – the resources and connections online communities provide can be an important source of information and support.
- Lawmakers in conservative states are seeking to prevent children from accessing information and communities online that conflict with right-wing ideology, creating a “red-state curtain” that compounds censorship in states where children’s exposure to LGBTQ+ and racial inclusion content is already limited.

01 Introduction

Over the past few years, right-wing politicians and activists have driven a curriculum censorship movement in an attempt to grow their oversight and influence over schools. But while much attention has been given to recent efforts by Republicans to censor children’s education, little to none has been given to the recent movement growing in tandem with these attempts. Wrapped in the same specious justifications underlying calls for book bans, lawmakers are now seeking to control students’ access to information online.

Wrapped in the same specious justifications underlying calls for book bans, lawmakers are now seeking to control students’ access to information online.

In this report, we examine the close ties between modern attempts to censor subjects in schools pertaining to race, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and efforts by lawmakers to limit access to similar information outside of the classroom in the digital world. In order to better understand the relationship between both movements, this report explores the dynamic between lawmakers pushing digital censorship legislation and those supporting curriculum censorship in schools, groups supporting their efforts, and states passing these bills into law. States which passed significant digital censorship bills in 2023, including Arkansas, Louisiana, Utah, and Texas, are studied in depth.

In case after case, the same elected officials, the same advocacy groups, and the same legislatures pushing anti-LGBTQ+ curriculum censorship agendas are also leading the movement to limit teens’ access to information on the Internet.

Not surprisingly, the harms done by one movement are compounded by the other, often hurting those already at risk. In a recent social media advisory, the Surgeon General highlighted how “the buffering effects against stress that online social support from peers may provide can be especially important for youth who are often marginalized, including racial, ethnic, and sexual and gender minorities.”¹

LGBTQ+ children are particularly reliant on online networks as a result. According to research from the Trevor Project, only 50% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported their home as gender-affirming.² Studies show that the Internet can offer the support LGBTQ+ teenagers don’t receive offline, which is why many LGBTQ+ youth turn to online resources to connect with peers and find a community unavailable to them IRL.³

Just like the curriculum censorship movement in education, the attempt to regulate children’s access to content online fundamentally seeks to restrict a source of information and community teens need to thrive. These efforts threaten our teens’ mental health by shuttering their online refuges, making it harder for teens to prepare themselves for adulthood and stifling their development at a time when they should be free to discover their sense of self.

By uncovering the connections between the curriculum censorship movement and its digital cousin, the full impact of digital censorship legislation becomes clear: LGBTQ+ and other marginalized young people will be further isolated by a new strain of content censorship – this time online.

02

Call it what it is: Censorship

Since the end of the pandemic, a slew of legislation at both the state and federal level has emerged seeking to censor materials in classrooms and school libraries. Marketed by conservatives as “parents’ rights” legislation, these bills purport to protect kids and teens. In reality, this legislation increases the reach of a right-wing political agenda by limiting minors’ access to information and communities.

1. “Social Media and Youth Mental Health.” <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>.

2. “2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People.” The Trevor Project, www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/. Accessed 7 Aug. 2023.

3. Harper, Gary W, et al. “The Internet’s Multiple Roles in Facilitating the Sexual Orientation Identity Development of Gay and Bisexual Male Adolescents.” American Journal of Men’s Health, Sept. 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4824670/.

Laws like Florida’s Parental Rights in Education Act – the “Don’t Say Gay” law – use the excuse of increasing parental control over children’s curriculum in order to ban classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity and remove books about queer lives from libraries.⁴ In states like Texas, lawmakers have even mobilized to both pass and weaponize legislation banning schools from teaching lessons on racial injustice.⁵

These kinds of bills, rather than empowering or protecting minors, stigmatize marginalized communities and deny students access to information and resources about peers who identify like they do. For some, this stigmatization and isolation may lead to depression, anxiety, self-harm and even suicide.⁶

The weaponization of curriculum censorship laws to attack marginalized communities and students who identify differently across racial and gender spectrums has become widespread and increasingly has expanded beyond the walls of our nation’s schools.⁷

In 2023, the attention of many conservative legislators and advocates turned to teens’ online access to information. In Texas, a coalition of lawmakers and advocates with ties to the school censorship movement passed H.B. 18, the Securing Children Online through Parental Empowerment (SCOPE) Act. The SCOPE Act limits teen access to online platforms by asserting parental control over minors’ and children’s use of social media services and by imposing liability on platforms for allowing minors to access certain content.

...laws like H.B. 18 impose a specific viewpoint on all children – one that is historically antagonistic to LGBTQ+ and minority communities...

4. Jessica Winter and Tyler Foggatt, “The Queer Children’s Books Targeted by the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Bill,” July 15, 2022, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/queer-childrens-books-targeted-dont-say-gay-bill>

5. Zelinski, Andrea, “Lone Star Parent Power: How One of the Nation’s Toughest Anti-Critical Race Theory Laws Emboldened Angry Texas Parents Demanding Book Banning, Educator Firings,” November 4, 2021, <https://www.the74million.org/article/lone-star-parent-power-how-one-of-the-nations-toughest-anti-critical-race-theory-laws-emboldened-angry-texas-parents-demanding-book-banning-educator-firings/>

6. “APA president condemns Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill,” March 9, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2022/03/florida-dont-say-gay>

7. Farrington, Brendan, “Florida Gov. DeSantis signs bills targeting drag shows, trans rights and care for transgender children,” May 17, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/florida-gov-desantis-signs-bills-targeting-drag-shows-trans-rights-and-care-for-transgender-children>

At face value, parental monitoring of children’s online activity is not inherently problematic and in many cases could be beneficial. However, laws like H.B. 18 impose a specific viewpoint on all children – one that is historically antagonistic to LGBTQ+ and minority communities – and require minors up to the age of 17 to seek parental approval to access a wide range of information.

H.B. 18 includes language prohibiting teen access to “grooming” content online, a term that has consistently been used in the curriculum censorship movement’s attack on LGBTQ+ materials in school libraries.⁸ By using broad, ill-defined terms like “grooming,” H.B. 18 sets up Texas to block children from interacting with a range of content that can be helpful for teens, including information about gender identity, reproductive health, and equality for LGBTQ+ people – all topics discussed by books that have been removed from Texas libraries in the past year.⁹

Under the guise of protecting children, H.B. 18 actually denies the ability of parents and teens to affirmatively choose what content they see online and in school, censoring access to materials that promote inclusion and acknowledge the hardships faced by marginalized communities.

In addition to explicitly censoring some content for teen users, H.B. 18 includes parental consent provisions that require parents to sign off for their children to access social media platforms. The same week that Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed H.B. 18 into law, Abbott also signed H.B. 900 into law, which includes consent provisions requiring parents to sign off for their children to access library materials that include sexual content.

For teens who do not live in a supportive household, whose parents do not recognize their identity, or whose guardians do not allow access to materials that conflict with a right-wing ideology, such consent requirements can eliminate access to information on ethnic identity, gender identity, and racial injustice.

Censorship Creep

While Texas has gained notoriety for curriculum censorship, it is not the only state where a conservative movement has mobilized to restrict access to vital information both in schools and online. In March of this year, the Utah legislature enacted S.B. 152, which requires platforms to enforce age verification for users in Utah and obtain parental consent for those under

8. Hannah Natanson, “‘Racist,’ ‘grooming’: Why parents are trying to ban so many picture books,” The Washington Post, July 12, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/07/12/grooming-racist-why-adults-are-waging-war-childrens-picture-books-or-inside-adult-war-childrens-picture-books/>

9. Mike Hixenbaugh, “Banned: Books on race and sexuality are disappearing from Texas schools in record numbers,” NBC News, February 1, 2022, Updated February 2, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-books-race-sexuality-schools-rcna13886>; Brant Bingamon, “Texas GOP’s Book Bans Are the First Step in Anti-Public Education Crusade: Banning books (for Jesus!),” The Austin Chronicle, June 30, 2023, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2023-06-30/texas-gops-book-bans-are-the-first-step-in-anti-public-education-crusade/>

18 to create an account.¹⁰ S.B. 152 goes so far as to provide parents access to all of their teens' posts and direct messages on social media platforms.

As in Texas, the bill's requirements for parental control over a minor's social media account reflect similar measures Utah enacted this year increasing parental control over access to school library materials. One week prior to signing S.B. 152, which enables parental monitoring of teen social media activity, Utah's governor signed H.B. 465, legislation enabling parental monitoring of teens' access to school library materials.¹¹

Louisiana and Arkansas provide additional examples of how the weaponization of censorship in classrooms to undermine marginalized children and teens has spread to the arena of tech and social media across the country. Louisiana bills H.B. 61 and S.B. 162 are both digital censorship bills which, like Utah's legislation, prohibit online services including social networks and video-sharing apps from allowing children and teens to sign up for accounts without parental consent.

Once again, these efforts to increase parental control over children's online activity mirror and exacerbate curriculum censorship laws enacted contemporaneously. The same day that H.B. 61 and S.B. 162 were signed into law, Louisiana's governor signed S.B. 7, a bill allowing parents to restrict their children's access to library materials. Taken together, the package of parental control legislation enacts far-reaching restrictions that close off teens' access to supportive communities and resources.

In their requirements for parental approval and monitoring, new digital censorship laws in Utah, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas mimic similar curriculum censorship laws in each state that create parental consent and monitoring requirements for teens accessing school library materials. Despite their purported focus on children's safety, the new strain of digital censorship laws only exacerbates the impact of curriculum censorship, making it more difficult for children in unsupportive and even abusive households to access help and information.

03

Same bills, same states

The volume of censorship legislation enacted by Republicans since 2022 defines the beginning of a new era in right-wing attempts to censor content both on and offline. In the previous

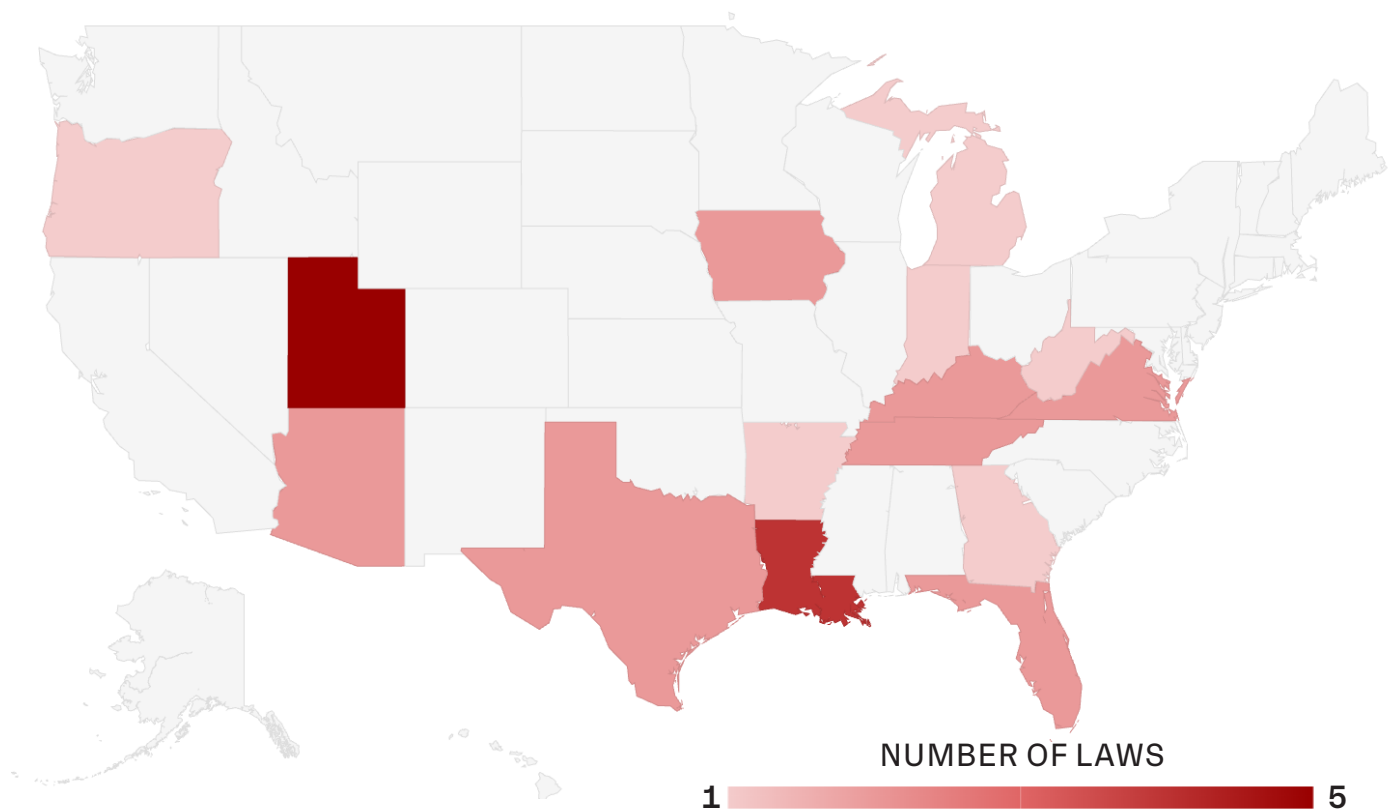
10. Jess Weatherbed, "Utah governor signs new laws requiring parental consent for under-18s to use social media," The Verge, March 24, 2023, <https://www.theverge.com/2023/3/24/23654719/utah-social-media-bill-law-minors-age-verification-tiktok-instagram>; "Utah Legislature Passes Bills Restricting Social Media Accounts for Minors," Hunton Andrews Kurth, March 10, 2023, <https://www.huntonprivacyblog.com/2023/03/10/utah-legislature-passes-bills-restricting-social-media-accounts-for-minors/>

11. Utah State Legislature, "H.B. 465 Public School Library Transparency Amendments," March 17, 2023, <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/HB0465.html>

section, we analyzed the similarities between select bills in Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Now we turn to nationwide trends and find that, unsurprisingly, **the same states pushing hardest for censorship in classrooms are seeking to limit the availability of specific content online – content that provides crucial affirmation and support to LGBTQ+ youth and other marginalized kids.**

According to our research, 30 parental control bills targeting access to information in schools and libraries have been enacted since 2022. Some amend an existing “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” while others seek to establish a new framework for the state.

ENACTED PARENTAL CONTROL LEGISLATION (2022-2023)



Generally, parental involvement in children’s education is a positive thing, however, these legislative efforts are often implicitly – or explicitly – tied to teachings regarding race and LGBTQ+ content. Overlap between states pushing for parental control over teens’ use of social media and states pushing for parental control in education is also common.

In one such state, Arkansas, Republicans passed H.B. 1738, which allows parents to remove children from any school activity that “conflicts with the parent’s religious or moral beliefs.”¹² H.B. 348 in Utah creates a similar provision that states a “student’s parent may waive the

12. Arkansas House Bill 1738, 94th General Assembly. 2023, <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FBills%2F2023R%2FPublic%2FHB1738.pdf>

student’s participation in any aspect of school that violates the student’s or the student’s parent’s religious belief or right of conscience.”¹³

Texas, another state pushing for restrictions on children’s access to social media, passed S.B. 8 earlier this year, which similarly asserts a parent’s control over the “moral and religious training” of children.¹⁴ S.B. 8 goes a step further, however, barring “instruction, guidance, activities, or programming regarding sexual orientation or gender identity to students enrolled in prekindergarten through 12th grade,” making the intent to ban LGBTQ+ content explicit.

Taken in a vacuum, parental control provisions may seem reasonable. However, in each of the states examined, right-wing parent organizations have a history of protesting curriculum that features lessons on injustice to and compassion for the LGBTQ+ community and racial minorities.^{15,16} Organizations like Texans Wake Up encourage parents to object to any lessons that include “anti-bullying/mental health material,” while another, Concerned Parents of Texas, warns parents of their children’s exposure to an education that “normalizes diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.”^{17,18} Both groups work to enable parents to remove their children from such lessons, revealing how legislation like S.B. 8 is used to advance an anti-LGBTQ agenda.

...right wing parent organizations have a history of protesting curriculum that features lessons on injustice to and compassion for the LGBTQ+ community and racial minorities.

Curriculum censorship laws – laws seeking to ban instruction of specific topics legislators have deemed objectionable – have also proliferated at an alarming rate in states that have passed or are considering digital censorship laws. Since 2022, 38 such bills have been enacted throughout the United States.

13. Utah House Bill 348, 64th Legislature. <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/HB0348.html>

14. Texas Senate Bill 8, 88th Legislature. <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/billtext/pdf/SB000081.pdf#navpanes=0>

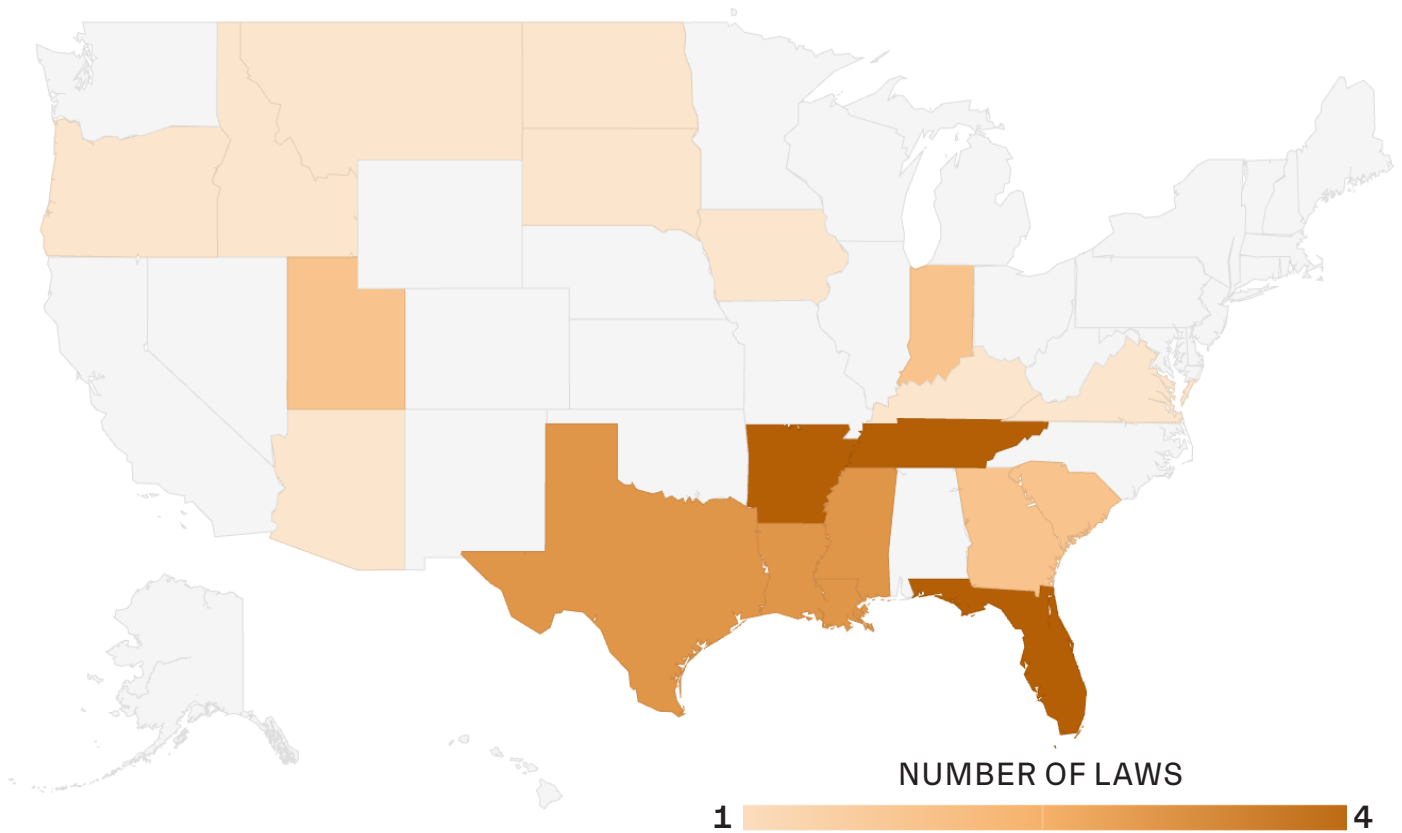
15. Smittle, Stephanie, “Moms for Liberty to rally against Pride Month at tonight’s school board meeting,” June 13, 2023, Arkansas Advocate, <https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2023/06/13/moms-for-liberty-to-rally-against-pride-month-at-tonights-school-board-meeting>

16. Spiewak, Jim, “Utah parents, advocates weigh in on critical race theory education debate,” May 4, 2021, KUTV, <https://kutv.com/news/local/utah-parents-advocates-weigh-in-on-critical-race-theory-education-debate>

17. Texans Wake Up - Act Now. <https://www.texanswakeup.com/act-now>

18. Concerned Parents of Texas. <https://www.concernedparentsoftexas.com/>

ENACTED CURRICULUM CENSORSHIP LEGISLATION (2022-2023)



Once again, Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana – all states seeking to restrict children’s access to content online – are included among states that have led in curriculum censorship, enacting 12 such laws between the four states since 2022.

In Texas, H.B. 3979 prevents teachers from being “compelled to discuss a particular current event or widely debated and currently controversial issue,” while S.B. 3 bars teaching of the 1619 Project and any materials pertaining to race that may make students feel “guilt.”¹⁹ H.B. 900 bars school libraries from carrying any books deemed “sexually explicit” for not conforming to “current community standards of decency.”²⁰

It is not hard to envision a scenario in which discussion of anything pertaining to LGBTQ+ rights or sexuality is prohibited for being “controversial,” or where the continued existence of racism is denied for fear that the acknowledgment of such a reality would make children uncomfortable.

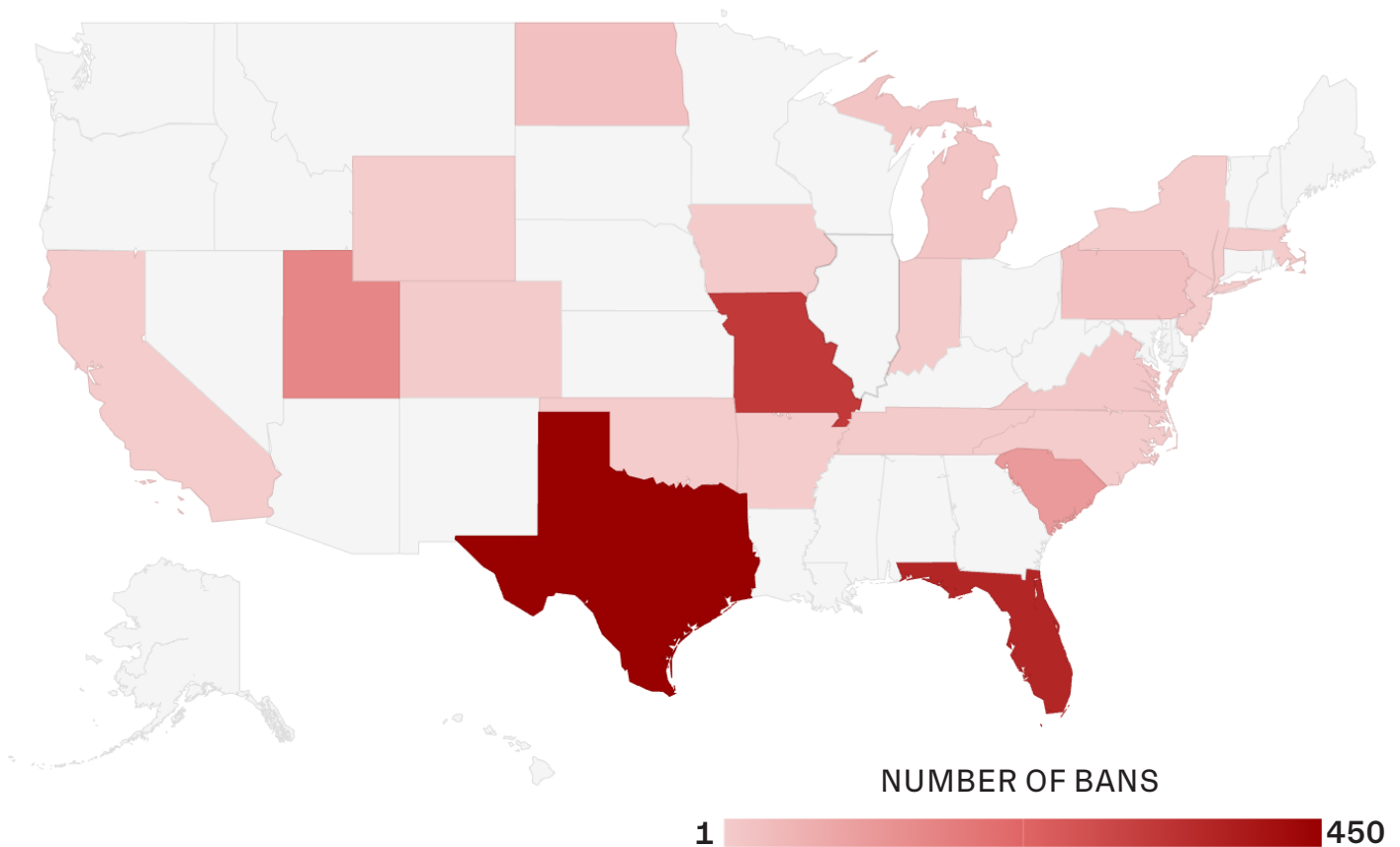
19. Texas Senate Bill 3, 88th Legislature. <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/872/billtext/pdf/SB00003F.pdf#navpanes=0>

20. Texas House Bill 900, 88th Legislature. <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=88R&Bill=HB900>

Utah has enacted two curriculum censorship bills since 2022, including H.B. 427 which prohibits the teaching of certain materials related to race, color, national origin, religion, disability, or sex.²¹ The law goes so far as to ban any instruction that implies individuals can be “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously,” effectively denying the existence of implicit bias or systemic oppression. Utah lawmakers also enacted H.B. 374, which prohibits “pornographic or indecent” materials in libraries, but has predominantly been used to remove books written by Black and LGBTQ+ authors.²²

In states seeking to control children’s access to educational resources, attempts to restrict curriculums aren’t limited to legislative interventions. As tracked by PEN America, individual book bans in states have exploded over the last year.^{23,24}

INDIVIDUAL BOOK BANS (2022)



21. Utah House Bill 427, 65th Legislature. <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/HB0427.html>

22. “Utah Parent Challenges Bible under New Book Ban Law.” QSaltLake Magazine, 23 May 2023, www.ksaltlake.com/news/2023/05/24/utah-parent-challenges-bible-under-new-book-ban-law/.

23. “Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Ban Books.” PEN America, 4 Apr. 2023, pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/.

24. “PEN America Index of School Book Bans - Fall 2022.” PEN America, 4 Apr. 2023, <https://pen.org/index-of-school-book-bans-2022/>



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Yet again, Utah, Texas, and Arkansas lead among states that have restricted students' access to information. In 2022, Texas led the nation with 438 individual book bans, while Utah came in fourth with 150 bans. While no individual book bans were recorded by PEN America in Louisiana in 2022, the state passed a bill in June of this year, S.B. 9, which bans “sexually explicit” materials from public libraries – but the term is left vague, enabling a blanket ban against LGBTQ+ content.²⁵

In fact, in 2022, over 40% of individual book bans throughout the country were imposed on books that include LGBTQ+ themes or characters. As the Human Rights Campaign notes, these bans aren't focused on protecting youth, but “aim to prevent the discussion LGBTQ+ issues or people.”²⁶

The cumulative efforts of lawmakers to enable parental controls and censorship over teen access to school libraries and online platforms has drawn a red-state curtain cutting off minors' contact with LGBTQ+ and racial inclusion content. The fact that the same lawmakers and organizations supporting curriculum censorship are pushing for censorship over the content children can see online speaks to the close ties and motivations underlying both these efforts.

04

Bedfellows in censorship, online and off

The close relationship between the curriculum censorship movement and recent digital censorship legislation is brought into stark relief when examining the ties between the legislators and organizations that lead both efforts. These ties can be seen in every state that has passed digital censorship legislation this year, including Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

TEXAS

In 2023, the Texas legislature passed far-reaching bills enacting new parental controls over access to in-school library materials as well as online resources. To restrict access to books, Texas passed H.B. 900, legislation banning “sexually explicit” books from school libraries.

25. Bridges, Author: Jenna. “Lawmakers Approve Bill to Limit Sexually Explicit Materials to Minors in Libraries.” Wwltv.Com, 8 June 2023, <https://www.wwltv.com/article/news/politics/bill-limit-sexually-explicit-materials-minors-libraries/289-cf65f737-3eae-4893-ab57-edb62ed5e780>

26. Luneau, Delphine, “Education Censorship, Book Bans, and Attacking Free Speech,” April 14, 2022, Human Rights Campaign, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/education-censorship-book-bans-and-attacking-free-speech-setting-the-record-straight-as-extremist-politicians-in-florida-alabama-and-other-states-attempt-to-reignite-culture-war-attacking-lgbtq-youth>



To restrict access to the Internet, Texas lawmakers enacted H.B. 18, requiring parental consent to access social media and banning so-called “grooming” content.

Again, language in both bills is left vague, threatening to sweep up LGBTQ+ content in far-reaching bans. The fact that the lawmakers and the organizations that mobilized to pass Texas’s school library censorship bill form the backbone of support that fought for Texas’s digital censorship legislation suggests this is by design.

Rep. Shelby Slawson, the primary sponsor behind Texas’s H.B. 18, was also a cosponsor and vocal supporter of H.B. 900, posting regularly about her support for legislation to remove books from school libraries.^{27,28} Likewise, the primary sponsor behind H.B. 900, Rep. Jared Patterson, was a cosponsor of Rep. Slawson’s digital censorship bill. Reps. Slawson and Patterson, however, were hardly alone in supporting both library censorship and digital censorship legislation. **In fact, a full 93% of cosponsors for H.B. 900 were also cosponsors of Texas’s H.B. 18.**

H.B. 18 also received the backing of advocacy organizations that support Texas’s curriculum censorship movement in schools. In hearings before the Texas House, organizations testifying in support of H.B. 18 included the following groups:²⁹

- The Texas Public Policy Foundation, which opposes LGBTQ+ and critical race theory curriculum and materials in schools, and which supported H.B. 900.^{30,31}
- The Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, which supports H.B. 900 as well as S.B. 420, a bill which proposed notifying parents when their children check out school library material.³²
- The Texas PTA, which is a vocal advocate for “Providing Local Control and Parental Opt-Out for Library Books,” and testified in support of H.B. 900^{33,34}

27. Slawson, Shelby, March 21, 2023, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/SlawsonForTexas/posts/pfbid-02b1E6UJWPvj3iwqpvJkQfFKWcNLrQGyZ1VPxkEZM25YUrKTL07vzb5811Lh6pyvHI>

28. Slawson, Shelby, April 19, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/SlawsonForTexas/posts/pfbid0bRme-3aE97F2dud7LdD4ZwXdoAeTD4hrpGvR6wrPG567hD9n9YSPou36DFdqxfw3I>

29. Texas Youth Health & Safety, Select Committee, Witness List, March 20, 2023, <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/witlistmtg/pdf/C4952023032014301.PDF>

30. <https://www.texaspolicy.com/adult-material-race-based-lessons-and-anti-parent-activity-in-schools/>

31. Texas Public Policy Foundation, H.B. 900 with Rep. Jared Patterson, March 15, 2023 <https://www.texaspolicy.com/multimedia/article/the-layout-H.B.-900-with-rep-jared-patterson>

32. Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, 88th Legislative Session Agenda, 2023, <https://txcatholic.org/88th-legislative-agenda-priorities/>

33. Texas PTA Legislative Priorities, 88th Legislative Session, <https://www.txpta.org/legislative-priorities>

34. Texas Senate Committee on Education, Witness List, May 11, 2023, <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/witlistmtg/pdf/C5302023051109001.PDF>



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In addition to organizations that testified in support of both H.B. 18 and H.B. 900, individuals also registered in support of both pieces of legislation. Among them was local Texas congressional candidate Michelle Evans. In addition to supporting H.B. 18, Evans is a prominent activist with the designated extremist group Moms for Liberty and has been a leading voice in Texas's book ban movement.³⁵

UTAH

In March of 2023, Utah became the first state to pass a digital censorship law with the enactment of S.B. 152, a bill that requires the consent of parents for teens to create a social media account and which compels platforms to provide parents access to read their children's posts and messages.

As in Texas, many of the legislation's cosponsors and supporters are also leaders in the curriculum censorship movement and have a history of supporting legislation that threatens access to LGBTQ+ and racial justice materials.

Floor sponsor of S.B. 152, Representative Jordan Teuscher, introduced a curriculum censorship measure last year, H.B. 234, which would have required teachers to post their class syllabuses and a list of learning materials online for parents to inspect.³⁶ Rep. Teuscher eventually scrapped the bill following heavy opposition from Utah educators and mounting public concern that the bill would lead to bans on books and teaching around race and racism.³⁷

S.B. 152 also received support from one of the primary architects of Utah's book ban legislation, self-described "porn czar" State Senator Todd Weiler. In 2022, Sen. Weiler was the floor sponsor of H.B. 374, a law banning "sensitive materials" from Utah school libraries. This year, Sen. Weiler continued to lead the parental control movement with legislation requiring schools to seek parental consent if a minor wishes to go by a different name or pronoun in school. During Senate floor consideration of this year's digital censorship bill, Sen. Weiler was the only lawmaker to speak in support of S.B. 152 aside from the bill's primary sponsor.³⁸

Outside the legislature, S.B. 152's supporters included leading school censorship advocates and policymakers. The groups that supported the bill during its hearings before Utah House and Senate legislative committees include:³⁹

35. Asmussen, Jason, Citizens Are Exposing Central Texas School Board's Corruption, October 22, 2021, Texas Scorecard, <https://texasscorecard.com/local/citizens-are-exposing-central-texas-school-boards-corruption/>

36. Courtney Tanner, "Utah lawmaker drops contentious measure with 30,000 signatures on teacher petition against it," The Salt Lake Tribune, January 28, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2022/01/28/utah-lawmaker-pulls/>

37. George Pyle, "Why Utah shouldn't micromanage its teachers, George Pyle writes," The Salt Lake Tribune, February 1, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2022/02/01/context-our-time/>

38. Sam Metz, "Utah law requiring porn sites verify user ages takes effect," AP News, May 3, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/porn-age-verification-utah-8f8f4960ad1ec4afc5d59fd7d34c3b9d>

39. "Minutes of the House Judiciary Standing Committee," Utah State Legislature, Tuesday, February 21, 2023, <https://le.utah.gov/~2003/minutes/HJUD0221.pdf>



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- The Worldwide Organization for Women, which believes that school libraries and digital resources like curated research databases are sexually and socially oppressing children. The organization supported Utah’s book ban legislation, H.B. 374.^{40 41}
- The Utah Eagle Forum, the state arm of a national right-wing interest group founded by conservative activist and anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly, which has advocated for curriculum censorship for years.⁴² The Utah Eagle Forum also advocated in support of the state’s book ban legislation, H.B. 374.⁴³
- Utah Parents United, a conservative group that has led attacks on how race and equity are taught in Utah’s schools, decrying critical race theory. The group has also protested against mask mandates in classrooms and fought in favor of dropping a social-emotional learning program at Canyons School District because it linked to a site about sex.⁴⁴

ARKANSAS

The legislators and organizations supporting Arkansas’s digital censorship bill, S.B. 396, have a long history of pushing forward censorship legislation asserting parental control over media and curriculum with themes related to race, gender, and sexuality.

In fact, the only witness to testify in favor of S.B. 396 during its consideration in the House Committee on Insurance and Commerce was Terry Schilling of the American Principles Project, an avid supporter of curriculum censorship and parental control. During his testimony before the House Committee, Schilling – who claims to be building “the NRA for families” and regularly attacks transgender rights – was not coy about using the legislation to push forward a conservative political agenda.⁴⁵ “We work to make parents and their families the most powerful special interest group in the country,” he said in testimony. “It’s important today for

40. “Insidious Sexual Targeting of Children at School,” Worldwide Organization for Women, November 19, 2021, <https://worldwideorganizationforwomen.org/education/children-are-the-target-for-sexual-revolution/>; Kayla Winn, “Utah school district removes Bible from elementary, junior high school libraries,” June 1, 2023, ABC News, <https://komonews.com/news/nation-world/utah-school-district-removes-bible-from-elementary-junior-high-school-libraries-book-ban-sensitive-material-anti-woke-legislation-education-vulgarity-violence-board-of-education>

41. Cortez, Marjorie, “From bake sales to ballot boxes: How the pandemic intensified parent activism,” Deseret News, April 12, 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2022/4/12/23022017/parents-public-schools-covid-19-bake-sales-ballot-boxes-how-the-pandemic-intensified-parent-activism>

42. Lesley Mitchell, “Eagle Forum speakers decry ‘big trouble’ in education system,” The Salt Lake Tribune, January 15, 2011, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=51057249&itype=CMSID>; “<https://www.utaheagleforum.org/about-uef.html#/>”; Bryan Schott, “Eagle Forum conference helps inject fringe ideas into Utah’s political mainstream,” The Salt Lake Tribune, January 10, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2022/01/10/eagle-forum-conference/>

43. H.B. 374 Flyer, 2022, <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2022/pdf/00001955.pdf>

44. Courtney Tanner, “Utah Parents United has set up a PAC to have more political influence,” The Salt Lake Tribune, March 23, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2022/03/23/utah-parents-united-has/>

45. Terry Schilling. GLAAD. (2023, April 21). <https://glaad.org/gap/terry-schilling/>

legislators to give parents more power and control over what their children have access to online.”

Schilling and the American Principles Project (APP) have spent millions of dollars on political ads calling for the ban of LGBTQ+ books in school libraries and launching electoral efforts in states from Maine to Michigan opposing candidates that have failed to support their book ban agenda. In one set of APP TV ads against Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a narrator reads passages of *Gender Queer* while a message tells viewers, “stop grooming our kids.”⁴⁶ APP is an outspoken anti-trans advocacy organization and also works to stop non-discrimination laws.⁴⁷

Lead sponsor for S.B. 396, Sen. Tyler Dees, echoed APP’s messaging in his testimony during House and Senate committee hearings on the bill. During a March Senate hearing on S.B. 396, Dees argued that, “We have allowed an atmosphere where students, kids, young people, are going onto social media without their parents knowledge, without their guardians knowledge, and unfortunately they’re being preyed on by groomers.”⁴⁸ A week later, during the bill’s House markup, Dees again testified that the bill was needed because children are being exposed to “groomers” online.⁴⁹

Sen. Dees was also a vocal supporter of Arkansas curriculum censorship law, S.B. 81, which threatens librarians with criminal penalties for distributing materials deemed to be “obscene.”⁵⁰

Both Sen. Dees and lead House sponsor of S.B. 396, Rep. Jon Eubanks, have, at times, noted that parental control, rather than child safety, was their driving motivation in pushing their bill forward. During a House hearing, Rep. Eubanks testified, “we’re just asking that parents be more involved to oversee what kind of material their children are accessing.” Separately, Sen. Dees has remarked that, “We will empower our parents through this act and that’s why we filed this bill.”⁵¹

46. <https://twitter.com/approject/status/1569302205273935872?s=20>; Steve Mistler, “Maine governor race takes center stage in national conservative group’s latest attack on LGBTQ books,” *Maine Public*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.maine-public.org/politics/2022-09-13/maine-governor-race-is-center-stage-in-a-national-conservative-groups-latest-attack-on-lgbtq-books>

47. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRn2FlhdBck>; <https://www.c-span.org/video/?513055-3/terry-schilling-american-principles-project>

48. Senate Insurance and Commerce Committee, “March 28 Hearing,” March 28, 2023, <https://sg001-harmony.sliq.net/00284/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2/20230328/-1/27771>

49. House Insurance and Commerce Committee, “April 3 Hearing,” April 3, 2023, <https://sg001-harmony.sliq.net/00284/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2/20230403/-1/27855>

50. Senator Tyler Dees, February 25, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbidOp-PuCrj6dZerp9WcPMwnXyHf4D1U4dpQG3Kfa8ncFicULa6xnjHdztCzkP2R3aJwl&id=100079074878535&tn=%2C0%2CP-y-R

51. Wilson, Micah, “A look at Arkansas’ newly passed and upcoming laws,” *KFSM-TV*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.5news.com/article/news/politics/a-look-at-arkansas-new-latest-legislation/527-f7c4b181-24fd-43a2-a771-793854dfcef6>

...laws calling for “parental involvement” often become pretextual vehicles for **censorship.**

Wanting to restrict children’s access to harmful content online is admirable, but when the people and organizations pushing legislation to do so have deemed any discussion of LGBTQ+ content to be damaging – as they have in Arkansas – laws calling for “parental involvement” often become pretextual vehicles for censorship.

LOUISIANA

Louisiana holds the unique distinction of passing two digital parental control bills in 2023, both requiring minors to seek parental consent to access online resources. Unsurprisingly, S.B. 162 and H.B. 61 passed with the support of lawmakers and advocacy groups tied to the curriculum censorship movement.

In the case of S.B. 162, bill cosponsor and champion, Sen. Heather Cloud has played a starring role in Louisiana’s parental control movement. In addition to her work supporting digital censorship legislation, Sen. Cloud was the primary sponsor of S.B. 7, a bill requiring the state’s public libraries to institute a card system that allows parents to determine what material their children can check out.⁵² The bill also requires libraries to consider “community standards for the population served by the library” when buying materials.

Sen. Cloud was responsible for guiding S.B. 162 through Louisiana’s Senate Committee on Finance. Introducing the bill to the committee, Sen. Cloud remarked that the legislation would help to address, “the grooming that we’re seeing.”⁵³ Concerns around “grooming” were also raised to justify the introduction of Sen. Cloud’s library parental consent and book ban legislation, which targets books with LGBTQ+ themes.⁵⁴

52. Hutchinson, Piper, “Louisiana governor signs bill restricting minors’ access to certain library materials,” Louisiana Illuminator, June 30, 2023, <https://lailluminator.com/2023/06/30/louisiana-governor-signs-bill-restricting-minors-access-to-certain-library-materials/>

53. “Louisiana State Senate Committee Hearing on Finance,” May 5, 2023, https://senate.la.gov/s_video/VideoArchivePlayer?v=senate/2023/05/051523FNCE

54. Hutchinson, Piper, “Attorney general, legislators call for restricting minors’ access to library materials,” Louisiana Illuminator, February 7, 2023, <https://lailluminator.com/2023/02/07/attorney-general-legislators-call-for-restricting-minors-access-to-library-materials/#:~:text=Louisiana%20Attorney%20General%20Jeff%20Landry%20has%20called%20for%20legislation%20to,available%20to%20minors%20at%20libraries.>

Louisiana’s other digital censorship bill, H.B. 61, found support with a similar base of parental control proponents and anti-LGBTQ+ advocates. Bill sponsor Rep. Laurie Schlegel has a history of advocating for parental control measures and has also championed in-school measures that isolate and stigmatize LGBTQ+ students, including legislation banning trans athletes from competing in school sports as well as a ban on gender-affirming care for teens.^{55,56}

H.B. 61 also received support from parental control groups including the Louisiana Family Forum, which advocates for parental control in education and championed Louisiana’s S.B. 7 book ban legislation.⁵⁷

05 Conclusion

With censorship legislation targeting both online and offline content, right-wing lawmakers in state legislatures across the country are asserting the right of parents to restrict access to information for children and teens – particularly those from marginalized communities. The compounded effect of these laws is to cut off minors in red states from accessing information and communities that serve as a refuge for many teens.

By exposing the relationship between efforts to ban access to online content and efforts to censor curriculums, prohibit classroom discussion of certain topics, and ban books, the position that digital censorship legislation occupies within the broader conservative censorship movement becomes clear.

Far-right conservatives pushing digital censorship legislation use the same justifications and language relied on by lawmakers working to ban information in the classroom. In hearing after hearing, the lawmakers, organizations, and individuals who turn out to support digital censorship legislation are also the same groups championing the school censorship movement.

The overlap between states introducing parental control legislation and legislation restricting children’s access to content online – most pronounced in Texas, Utah, Arkansas, and Louisiana – further demonstrates the link between both endeavors. Individual book bans and legislation banning certain types of books proliferating in those same states offers more proof that curriculum censorship efforts are really about exerting conservative control over the content children and teens can access.

55. Levesque, Brody, “Anti-Trans Youth Sports Ban Bill Headed to Louisiana Governor’s Desk,” LA Blade, May 27, 2021, <https://www.losangelesblade.com/2021/05/27/anti-trans-youth-sports-ban-bill-headed-to-louisiana-governors-desk/>

56. Mahieu, Leif Le, “Louisiana Lawmakers Override Democrat Governor’s Veto Of Child Sex Change Ban In Rare Vote,” Daily Wire, July 18, 2023, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/louisiana-lawmakers-override-democrat-governors-veto-of-child-sex-change-ban-in-rare-vote>

57. Louisiana Family Forum, “The Session Has Ended!” June 13, 2023, <https://lafamilyforum.salsalabs.org/family-facts061323>

Marginalized and at-risk youth have the most to lose. Not all teenagers live in a household with supportive parents – over half a million cases of child abuse and neglect are reported in the United States each year.⁵⁸ For children and teens at risk of abuse, the resources and connections online communities provide can be an important source of information and support. However, rather than encourage children to explore information that supports their development, conservative lawmakers have cut off access to material that affirms the existence of marginalized identities.

As the Internet and social media play an increasingly significant role in children’s development, it is unsurprising that a political movement aimed at restricting teens’ exposure to LGBTQ+ and racial inclusion content has turned its attention to the digital world. However, just as connections between parental control legislation and school censorship of LGBTQ+ and racial content are drawn, the intrinsic link between efforts to limit kids’ access to online information and the desire to isolate and marginalize whole communities of young people must be recognized.

The impacts of enabling censorship of information available to teens online could be disastrous for a generation of young people growing up in states where book bans are already pervasive. As more states, including Georgia, contemplate passing digital censorship legislation, it is critical that the role and intent of the curriculum censorship movement in supporting this legislative trend be exposed.⁵⁹ With teen access to health resources, educational materials, and identity-confirming content at risk, policymakers and voters should be fully aware of the dangers posed by online censorship targeting young users.

58. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2022). Child Maltreatment 2020. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

59. Oshin, Olafimihan, “Georgia Republicans eyeing legislation requiring parents’ permission for kids’ social media accounts,” The Hill, August 8, 2023. <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/4143708-georgia-republicans-eyeing-legislation-requiring-parents-permission-for-kids-social-media-accounts/>