

Public Policy

Is There a Hidden Agenda Behind the "Parents' Rights" Movement?

By Jeanne Delp

The following is from AAUW California Public Policy School Board Project and has been edited for length.

The House of Representatives recently passed H.R. 5, the "Parents Bill of Rights Act." Eight governors have signed legislation with similar titles. H.R. 5 establishes the rights of parents to, among other things: review curriculum; inspect the books and other reading materials in the school library; be advised of policies that permit transgender girls to compete on female athletic teams or use bathrooms or lockers designated for females; and provide consent before a school may use their child's chosen name or pronouns on forms, or change the child's sex-based accommodations. Many of the state laws noted above require the removal of "inappropriate" materials upon the objection of a single person.

AAUW California recognizes that not all our members will find these policies objectionable. And to be sure, most of our members would agree with this statement from PEN America, a human rights and free expression organization: "There is no question that parents deserve a say in shaping their children's educations; that they have a moral and legal responsibility for their children, and the freedom to make fundamental decisions for their families." (Suzanne Nossel, PEN America CEO, [Time Sept. 20, 2022.](#))

However, legitimate questions are raised when one parent's "right" to control what their child reads and learns collides with another parent's right to ensure their child has access to a broad and diverse range of educational materials. Or when a parent's "right" to know if their child confides to a teacher regarding a sexual identity unknown to the parent collides with the student's right to privacy. Or when one parent's "right" to ensure her daughter doesn't play on the same team as a transgender girl collides with that girl's right to partake in all the same activities as other girls, or to feel safe in the campus environment.

AAUW California advocates for a diverse curriculum in our schools, as well as the protection of all forms of gender identity and expression. It is a cause of concern when the rallying cry of "parents' rights" is, as stated by PEN America, "wielded to do far more than give parents their rightful voice; it is turning public schools into political battle grounds, fracturing communities, and diverting time and energy away from teaching and learning." Additionally, according to the National Education Association (NEA), H.R. 5 "ignores the breadth of parental engagement" that already exists, "disregards educator experience and expertise" and "inserts the government into local decisions."

PEN America worries that the current emphasis on working with schools for the betterment of the child has been replaced with a parental focus on wanting to impose

their personal beliefs – moral, religious, and/or political – on the entire education system. As an organization founded on the principal of expanding educational opportunities we might all heed Suzanne Nossel’s final words in her *Time* article: “The phrase ‘parents’ rights’ may have a nice ring to it, but the agenda now afoot in its name should sound alarms for all those who care about the future of public education.”

Please do read more at: [Pen.org](https://pen.org) and [Nea.org](https://nea.org). These provide very specific numbers and information. For example:

- From July 2021 to June 2023, PEN America’s Index of School Book Bans recorded 5,894 instances of book bans across 41 states and 247 public school districts.
- “Copycat bans” have emerged as a key component of the book ban movement, with a portion of titles removed seemingly because another district removed it elsewhere.

Is California in a safe place with Gov. Newsom’s signing of AB1078, which bans “book bans” in schools, prohibits censorship of instructional materials, and strengthens California law requiring schools to provide all students access to textbooks that teach about California’s diverse communities? SCOTUS may have something to say about this issue, so remember to be an influencer on Lobby Days, be a volunteer for LWV’s Voter Registration for high school students, and be sure that you are a voter in California’s Presidential Primary Election March 5, 2024.

