

# The Impact of Book Bans on LGBTQ Students

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**Abstract**— This brief aims to provide an analysis of the impact book bans and restrictive library policies have on LGBTQ+ students. It will provide a background into the struggles LGBTQ+ youth face, and how lack of access to queer-friendly literature will negatively affect LGBTQ+ students' mental health and ability to feel safe in schools. Specifically, this brief will analyze Central Bucks School District's Policy 109.2, which seeks to keep "sexualized" content out of K-12 libraries, and analyze why the previous library policy is much more beneficial to all community members over 109.2.

**Keywords**— book ban, library policy, parental rights, LGBTQ youth, mental health

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of book ban policies has increased in recent years. While supporters of these library rules cite parental rights and that removing sexualized content is necessary to keep accessible novels age-appropriate, civil rights groups and free speech experts argue that vague language within these policies serves as a disguise to target novels focused on LGBTQ themes. This also comes at a time when there are attacks against LGBTQ youth across all fields in education - access to playing sports with one's identified gender, the teaching of queer history, pride flags in classrooms - and many LGBTQ youth struggle with mental health issues. This policy brief will analyze the negative impact of these library policies on the safety of LGBTQ youth and highlight why book bans are not the best way to protect students from "inappropriate" content.

## II. OVERVIEW

["Book ban" policies](#) have increased significantly in the past few years across K-12 public schools in the United States. Book bans aim to remove books based on certain themes or topics, often noted by critics as "too mature" or "inappropriate" for elementary, middle, or high schoolers; however, as noted in a study by PEN America, a

disproportionate number of these [book bans target](#)

[LGBTQ young adult literature](#), at a whopping 41%.

District (CBSD), located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in the suburbs of Philadelphia. To provide some context, Bucks County is known as a swing county in a swing state, with [roughly an equal number of registered Republicans and Democrats](#). While the school board itself is

[analysis found that only 3.1% of young adult books](#) had an LGBTQ main character in 2019. Numbers from the years, as documented by the American Library Association, show an [unprecedented rise in book bans](#) in recent years, with the majority of those books being written by LGBTQ or POC authors. In the 435 anti-LGBTQ bills that the [ACLU is tracking](#) nationwide for the 2023 legislative session, an astounding 210 - or roughly half - pieces of legislation are related to education issues impacting queer and trans students.

Those leading the charge to ban books typically hold conservative, "traditional" beliefs; specifically regarding LGBTQ-focused books, [book ban proponents justify](#) this by calling queer content "overly sexualized" or even "pornographic". While book-banning has been initiated by legislators in state legislatures - an example being this [Pennsylvania House Bill titled the "Parental Bill of Rights"](#), the state that this analysis will primarily focus on - many school administration decisions come from the work of book-ban activists. At the helm of this movement is an organization entitled [Moms for Liberty](#) (MFL), a 501c4 focused on "educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights". With dozens of chapters established across the United States, MFL has played a massive role in pushing forward book ban legislation that has swept the country.

This policy brief will focus specifically on a book ban policy passed in the Central Bucks School

technically nonpartisan, it is currently made up of [nine members](#), three of who ran on a more liberal/Democratic platform, while six aligned themselves more with conservative ideals. Before the book ban, CBSD had already come under fire for placing a teacher on leave for supporting a trans student; informing teachers they were not allowed to address students by their chosen names and pronouns and only being able to use their legal identifiers; as well as its [pride flag ban](#), a symbol within the LGBTQ community indicating support and safety. Therefore, tensions between conservative, parental-rights groups such as MFL and other organizations focused on LGBTQ+ rights were already high before the installation of a book ban.

CBSD's [Policy 109.2](#), described by supporters as a "library policy" and protesters as a "book ban", passed in late July 2022 on the grounds that books could be restricted in schools based upon vague rules such as "implied nudity". As noted by the superintendent, [109.2's goal was to ensure students are reading "age-appropriate material"](#), which was backed up by MFL claiming parental rights and other groups stating that removing [sexually explicit content](#) was beneficial to all. Supporters referenced novels to be removed from a [list curated by the organization Woke PA](#), almost all of which feature fictional characters and nonfictional interviews of LGBTQ individuals. On the other hand, the opposition questioned the lack of specificity in the policy's language, and many civil rights groups - including the ACLU - argued there were [free speech concerns](#), with specific implications for LGBTQ+ books as aforementioned. Organizations such as the Education Law Center and National Coalition Against Censorship stated that 109.2 was one of the most restrictive library policies in the state, specifically on the grounds that one parent could file a complaint that would remove the book for the entire district, rather than the formal policy that

however, opponents cite this vagueness as a gateway to ban queer stories

- CBSD's Policy 109.2 is an example of a library policy that may result in the removal of LGBTQ themed books in the district and resulted in high community tensions

### *B. Relevance*

Bans on LGBTQ content come at a time where more queer and trans youth are finding it safer to come out and express their identity. In a study conducted by UCLA to measure the estimated number of LGBTQ youth aged between 13-17, they found that [around 9.5% of young Americans identify with the LGBTQ community](#). Another study, conducted by LGBTQ+ mental health advocacy organization The Trevor Project, found that [around 45% of youth aged 13-24 are also people of color](#). Yet within this growing and diverse subset of individuals, there is also a massive mental health crisis. The same Trevor Project study found that 45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and 60% of LGBTQ youth who wanted mental health care in the past year were unable to access it. Additional statistics found that LGBTQ+ youth who found their schools to be LGBTQ-affirming reported lower rates of attempting suicide, and queer and trans youth who live in a community more accepting of LGBTQ people reported significantly lower rates of attempting suicide than those who do not. While these last two statistics may seem like no-brainers, it proves that inclusivity makes a large difference in ensuring that LGBTQ youth feel safer and more

allowed a parent to restrict a book simply for their child. While the policy was passed months ago, it is a good case example of one of many book bans affecting students in the United States today.

### *A. Pointed Summary*

- Books bans have become increasingly commonplace in recent years
- Many book bans target literature featuring LGBTQ themes, despite very few books published focusing on LGBTQ characters
- Supporters of book bans cite their reasoning as removing "sexually explicit" material;

comfortable in their identity. This is backed up by a [public health study](#) showing that LGBTQ students living in states and cities with more protective school climates are at lower risk of suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts, with sexual orientation disparities in suicidal thoughts nearly eliminated in the most safe environments. Therefore, when LGBTQ books like those on Woke PA's list are removed from school libraries, it harms LGBTQ students' mental health and well-being. It is thus extremely relevant to analyze the ties between library policies such as 109.2 and the mental health of the LGBTQ youth population to identify how the

former has a correlation with the latter.

#### A. Current Stances

CBSD's 109.2 policy was passed in an age where anti-LGBTQ crackdowns have increased in public education spaces. As aforementioned, 109.2 had followed a pride flag ban in classrooms, demonstrating anti-LGBTQ sentiment in the district. Yet this has been spreading nationwide. NBC News reports that the [number of anti-LGBTQ bills](#), particularly in state legislatures, has "skyrocketed" in the past four years, with many restricting LGBTQ issues being taught in public school curriculums, limiting trans students' ability to engage in sports with the gender they identify as, use restrooms that correspond with their gender identity, and more. While public support for key LGBTQ rights has been steadily increasing - [79% of Americans support laws](#) protecting LGBTQ individuals from discrimination and nearly 70% support same-sex marriage, as found in a 2022 survey - the corresponding growth in anti-LGBTQ bills reflects not general public opinion, but raised levels of lobbying from groups such as MFL, as introduced earlier.

Perhaps most well-known in [leading attacks on LGBTQ rights in education](#) are Governors Greg Abbott and Ron DeSantis in the states of Texas and Florida, respectively. DeSantis's infamous "[Don't Say Gay](#)" Bill, which passed in the Republican-controlled state in March 2022 and aims to limit school discussions on sexual orientation or gender identity, drew global attention and criticism for being discriminatory; however, it also set a

precedent for dozens of other states and school districts to push through other anti-LGBTQ pieces of legislation. While Pennsylvania, where CBSD is located, has been controlled by a Democratic governor since 2015, gerrymandered districts have historically resulted in [GOP control of the state House and Senate](#), with the Democrats winning control of the lower chamber this year for the first time in over a decade. Therefore, while the governor is able to and typically has vetoed anti-LGBTQ legislation, this hasn't stopped the PA state legislature from [attempting to pass bills such as one limiting LGBTQ instruction](#), entitled the "Empowering Parents in Education" bill, which followed on the heels of Florida's Don't Say Gay legislation or others targeted on [banning transgender students from participating in sports](#) with their chosen gender identity.

Across Pennsylvania, CBSD is not the only

district facing book bans. In fact, according to free speech group [PEN America's 2022 index of school book bans](#), PA is second on a list of states with the highest number of banned books, only behind Texas and over double the amount in Florida, the third-highest. As of April 2022, prior to the passage of CBSD's 109.2, there were already over 456 books banned across nine school districts, with [33% of those explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ themes](#) - a massive number compared to the earlier statistics presented on how LGBTQ+-themed novels only comprise 3% of the young adult literary space. One of the districts that have drawn national prominence is Central York, located in the southeastern region of PA similar to CBSD, for being the [leading school district in the entire United States](#) with the highest number of bans in the index. Therefore, it is evident that anti-LGBTQ sentiment is prominent in the Pennsylvania educational landscape and likely played a role in inspiring 109.2's creation and passage.

#### B. Tried Policy

Before the passage of 109.2, CBSD's library policy was relatively straightforward - [librarians apply criteria](#) such as age suitability, connections to curriculum, and referencing recommendations and reviews in order to select the books that are added to

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school libraries. If parents were unhappy with a book that their child was reading, they had the [ability to restrict their child from reading it](#) in class; however, they did not have the ability to remove the book completely from libraries across the district, which 109.2 now allows parents to do.

Existing book ban policies, such as the one discussed above passed in Central York School District, have drawn heavy backlash, particularly for the removal of books focusing on LGBTQ communities and the experiences of people of color. However, other book-ban policies are heavily supported by conservative activist groups such as MFL.

### III. POLICY PROBLEM

#### A. Stakeholders

As mentioned in the overview, the CBSD community is deeply divided over LGBTQ issues



and parental rights which have culminated in the passage of 109.2. This section will provide a more in-depth analysis of all of the stakeholders involved in the book ban policy.

Firstly, the library policy most directly impacts K-12 students going through the district, with the worst negative impact on LGBTQ and POC students. Previously shared statistics highlight how the mental health of LGBTQ individuals improves significantly when inclusive, safe spaces are created. Additionally, sharing LGBTQ stories [helps students figure out their identities](#) and feel a sense of belonging. However, multiple studies have concluded that inclusion and [teaching about the importance of diversity is beneficial to all students](#), improving cognitive skills, critical thinking, and preparing students for the vibrant and multicultural society they will join post-graduation.

The parents of students within the district are also a stakeholder in the learning policy. As mentioned in the overview, some parents support 109.2 on the [basis of parental rights](#), claiming that they support removing books to protect kids from age-inappropriate and sexualized content. Some cite that they don't want teachers to use sexually explicit books to "[groom or indoctrinate kids](#)". Other parents, some of who have LGBTQ children in the district, claim that removing books with LGBTQ

ban under 109.2. MFL and Woke PA were largely inspired by national right-wing groups such as Parents Defending Education and No Left Turn in Education, as well as book ban legislation in Texas, and are a stakeholder in the policy as they were the ones who primarily resulted in the passage and implementation of 109.2.

On the other hand, many local, left-leaning grassroots organizers have consistently attended board meetings to protest against anti-LGBTQ policies in the district. Two major groups include [CBSD Neighbors United](#), a PAC-style organization uplifting board candidates who oppose book banning, and [Advocates for Inclusive Education \(AFIE\) Bucks County](#), who write on their website that they believe in intellectual freedom and oppose the censorship that 109.2 brings to the district. Other national civil rights groups have gotten involved in calling out 109.2 as a pathway to further discrimination, including the Education Law Center, NAACP, ACLU PA, PFLAG, PA School Librarians Association, and others.

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themes may lead to discrimination and lack of understanding, which may also result in increased bullying and harassment. Many current and former teachers and librarians have aligned themselves with the latter group, claiming that the policy would exclude historically resilient people and are necessary for learning the truth about the world. Some librarians and teachers have retired early or resigned surrounding the increased anti-LGBTQ attacks in the district, as well as over frustration that parents supporting the library policy do not trust them to choose age-appropriate reading material.

Many of those campaigning either for or against 109.2 align themselves with activist groups, which are a stakeholder in pushing forwards a mission that they align with. [MFL and Woke PA have consistently been mentioned through this policy review due to their continued presence at CBSD board meetings](#) to push forwards an anti-LGBTQ agenda. It may be important to note that these conservative groups gained prominence during the pandemic in fighting against COVID-19 restrictions; as general interest in the pandemic waned, these organizations shifted focus towards supporting policies such as the pride flag ban and now the book

Taxpayers are another group of stakeholders in this policy. As CBSD is a public school district, all residents who live within the zone of the district are required to pay taxes for CBSD, regardless of if they have children or any involvement with CBSD itself. Taxpayers are especially important after [CBSD spent over \\$250,000 of taxpayer money on attorney fees and public relations services](#) in order to defuse anti-LGBTQ criticism that the district has faced. Community members have called the usage of taxpayer dollars "fiscally irresponsible". Concerns over high taxes may result in more families leaving the district or refusing to move in, which is a major concern especially after [enrollment in public schools continues to decline](#) post-COVID.

Finally, while this may not be a direct stakeholder group, it is undeniable that the policy passed in CBSD may serve as a precedent for other public school districts across the nation to pass similar policies. Thus, the impacts of 109.2 in CBSD have effects across all of the United States.

#### *B. Risks of Indifference*

CBSD is under a federal investigation by the Department of Education for creating a "[toxic](#)"

[learning environment for LGBTQ students](#), so it's clear that policies regarding the book ban, pride flag ban, and refusing to use students' chosen names and pronouns have already created a climate of oppression and harassment. One study in the AJPH show that [institutional discrimination has resulted in a rise in psychiatric disorders](#) and suicidal ideation; another CDC study finds lack of educational support for [LGBTQ youth results in more violence victimization](#) and again, higher suicide risk. Therefore, [within CBSD's complaint](#), it is deeply disappointing but unsurprising to hear LGBTQ students talk about being called slurs, threatened and misgendered, miss school due to consistent bullying, and one transgender student share their experience of attempting suicide. The passage of anti-LGBTQ legislation such as 109.2 has a real impact on LGBTQ students in the district, which is not to be looked over.

Additionally, as aforementioned, book ban policies including 109.2 harm the learning of all students when not exposed to diversity, as well as

removing those choices from all students. Therefore, the best option to support the learning and safety of all students is to repeal 109.2 and return to the previous library policy allowing parent jurisdiction only for their own children. Parents already have the opportunity and a process to request their children not have access to certain library books. 109.2 is not breaking new grounds in allowing parents to challenge the novels their children pick up; it even removes critical acclaim and literary merit as necessary criteria to choose books based on educational suitability, which is extremely harmful in limiting students' ability to choose books that are profound and nationally recognized. Parental rights extend to everyone's children, not just a select group focused on one or

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taxpayers within the district when CBSD uses hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to fund PR and attorneys to defend themselves against their clear anti-LGBTQ legislation. This will result in the continued decline of enrollment in CBSD schools, as well as less economic growth in the region.

### *C. Nonpartisan Reasoning*

Public school districts' mission should always be to support the learning of all of their students, and [CBSD's mission statement](#) is no different, citing that they will "provide all students with the academic and problem-solving skills essential for personal development, responsible citizenship, and lifelong learning". When there are dozens of students that are actively being discriminated against and face consistent harassment, that jeopardizes this mission. 109.2 is a failure of the district to account for the voices of LGBTQ students who are speaking up against the erasure they feel in schools, an experience that [thousands of LGBTQ youth](#) are facing across the country. It is difficult to reason on the side of MFL and Woke PA when their arguments have barely as much weight as the safety, well-being, and learning of LGBTQ students.

two pages worth of sexually explicit material. It is unfair to restrict certain books to every student based on the opinions of a small group of MFL and Woke PA activists.

There are many counterarguments to MFL and Woke PA's points on why we should maintain 109.2, which I will discuss here to highlight why repealing 109.2 is the best policy practice for all involved. Right-leaning activists describe 109.2 as a "library policy" that is necessary to require books to be age-appropriate for student readers and is not an attack on LGBTQ stories. However, it is hard to uphold this argument when [four out of the five books](#) administrators initially chose for review center LGBTQ characters; again, a huge discrepancy against the estimate that LGBTQ literature only makes up 3% of YA novels. Additionally, [109.2 goes against the advice of dozens of experienced district library staff, national library associations, freedom of speech groups, and civil rights organizations](#), who have cited that 109.2 is censorship, goes against protected freedom of speech as described by the 1st Amendment, and [violates Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause](#) of the 14th Amendment. Professional educators and librarians have always selected age-appropriate materials for inclusion and understanding in libraries, guided by national learning standards applied to all public school districts. The previous library policy, which included books that appeared on MFL and Woke PA's books on limiting the content that their children consume in school; however, they should not have the option of that helped LGBTQ students feel secure in their

## IV. POLICY OPTIONS

Parents should still be allowed to make decisions on limiting the content that their children consume in school; however, they should not have the option of

identity. As mentioned, 109.2 has not - instead, it has cost the district thousands of dollars to defend itself and resulted in a federal civil rights investigation. This emphasizes that the prior library policy was perfectly suitable and helped students read diverse and appropriate novels, unlike 109.2.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, book ban policies such as 109.2 cultivate a culture of harassment and intolerance towards LGBTQ students, which is severely detrimental to their mental health, ability to learn, and safety in school. When 109.2 opens the doors to “parental rights” and allows one parent’s decision to remove a

book for students across the entire district, this can result in the erasure of students feeling secure in their identity, particularly as statistics highlight the mass majority of book removals to be targeted towards stories about people of color or people with LGBTQ identities.

This policy brief has aimed to highlight the negative impacts 109.2 will have not only on queer and trans students in CBSD, but their parents, teachers, and librarians that are leaving the district due to continued anti-LGBTQ sentiment, taxpayers, other students, and learners, and those impacted by the precedent it sets in encouraging other districts to enact similar policies. It is unfair for a small group of activists to make decisions that impact the wellbeing of the majority of stakeholders. Therefore, I strongly encourage CBSD revoke 109.2 and return to its prior library policy that allows parents to make book decisions solely for their children and their children alone.

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