**BANNED BOOKS IN IOWA**

**Banned Books in Iowa** (<https://www.aclu-ia.org/en/challenged-books-iowa-banned-books-week>)

**Free societies read freely!** It is our First Amendment right to decide for ourselves what we read, view, and hear—a fundamental element of free speech and expression.

But in recent months, public schools and libraries have been challenged like never before. The Iowa Legislature has signed into law[SF 496,](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=90&ba=SF496) a wide-ranging bill with vague, highly problematic language that requires public schools K-12 to remove all books that have "descriptions or visual depictions of a sex act," but excludes religious texts, such as the Bible.

Parents, community members, and politicians in communities across the state have been demanding that books they find objectionable be removed. Most of the books contain LGBTQ content and removing them is an attempt to erase the LGBTQ community.

Many of the books are award winners, and all have been vetted by librarians and teachers for appropriate content. Certainly, parents of schoolchildren have control over what their child reads, and they can work with their student's teacher and school to limit their access to certain books. But schools should not remove access to these books for*all* children in the classroom or school.

As reported in statewide media, [school administrators are struggling to comply.](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/07/09/iowa-schools-still-waiting-for-guidance-on-new-ban-on-books-with-sex-department-of-education-lgbtq/70357682007/) Some schools reported that they are waiting for guidance from the Iowa Department Education. Others already took action.

* Urbandale, for example, came up with a list of [374 books](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/07/31/urbandale-school-district-iowa-book-ban-law-flagged-ulysses-color-purple-heartstopper-lgbtq-themes/70459691007/) to remove from shelves and has since reduced that [to 64](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/urbandale/2023/08/03/urbandale-pauses-removing-state-banned-books-with-lgbtq-references-gender-identity-iowa-book-ban/70522886007/).
* [Norwalk issued a list](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/08/04/norwalk-iowa-book-ban-banned-list-stonewall-wicked-forever-gender-identity-sexual-orientation/70531046007/) of 64 banned books.
* Mason City banned 20 books from schools with a dystopian twist—[using AI to help determine which ones should be banned.](https://www.wired.com/story/chatgpt-ban-books-iowa-schools-sf-496/)
* [Iowa City removed 68 books.](https://www.press-citizen.com/story/news/local/2023/10/19/list-of-books-coming-off-library-shelves-in-the-iowa-city-community-school-district/71217800007/)

Overall, [*The Des Moines Register*](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/10/16/database-banned-books-removed-from-iowa-school-libraries-under-new-state-law-senate-file-496/70995919007/) found that more than 450 individual works by more than 300 authors have already been pulled from the shelves of Iowa school districts.

The bill also includes a provision that forbids "any program, curriculum, test, survey, questionnaire, promotion, or instruction relating to gender identity or sexual orientation," grades K-6 which is being interpreted by some schools to prohibit books with LGBTQ themes or characters.

While SF 496 has hugely expanded the scale of book banning in Iowa, there have been attempts for many years to remove books—mainly books about LGBTQ people—from school and city libraries.

In Pella in 2022, the [city council nearly seized control of the public library](https://www.oskaloosa.com/news/local_news/city-of-pella-will-not-pursue-exclusive-control-of-public-library/article_d76c7332-b5c7-11ec-863e-3bf5fda19917.html) because the library continued to offer the award-winning book, "Gender Queer," to its patrons.

At the Vinton Public Library, two directors resigned because of efforts to purge LGBTQ books. Our statement on that situation can be found [here.](https://www.aclu-ia.org/en/press-releases/statement-challenged-books-and-turnover-vinton-library)

In 2018, Orange City was a hot spot for concerns about book banning. A [petition was circulated in Orange City,](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2018/03/21/library-change-lgbtq-content-grouping-change-orange-city-iowa/445970002/) demanding that the local library segregate and label books and content that have any LGBTQ content and halt the acquisition of any more. The library has since simply revised its overall classification of books by topic rather than author. Later that year, a man objecting to children's books at the library with LGBTQ content [burned them and shared a video](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/crime-and-courts/2019/08/06/book-burning-iowa-man-who-burned-lgbtq-books-trial-paul-dorr-david-levithan-orange-city-library/1936961001/)of it on social media.

In other cases, specific books have been the target of more limited challenges. The following is a listing of notable books that have been challenged from 2005 to 2022 in Iowa libraries because they contained references to sex, had LGBTQ references or characters, swear words, violence, mentions of violence, or mentions of suicide or drug use.

The [*Des Moines Register*](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/08/17/people-have-challenged-60-books-in-iowa-schools-in-3-years-the-top-9/70443750007/) examined 327 Iowa public school districts from August 2020 to May 2023. This is a list of 9 novels challenged more than any others:

* *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
* *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe
* *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson
* *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins
* *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
* *Sold* by Patricia McCormick
* *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez
* *Looking for Alaska* by John Green -*Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison

**Iowa's proposed rules on banning books in schools are out. Here's what you should know:**

[**Samantha Hernandez**](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/staff/4386954002/samantha-hernandez/)

Des Moines Register 11/15/23

Iowa schools have been waiting for them for months, and now they're here — long-awaited rules intended to help teachers and administrators comply with an expansive new education law banning sexually explicit books and placing restrictions on accommodating gender identity for students.

The Iowa Board of Education discussed the proposed rules Wednesday, just a few weeks before penalties go into effect Jan. 1, 2024, for schools that fail to comply with [Senate File 496](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=SF%20496&ga=90).

The law requires the removal of all school books that depict sexual acts, bars discussion and instruction through sixth grade pertaining to gender identity and sexual orientation, and requires school administrators to alert a student's caregiver if the child wants to use pronouns that differ from their sex assigned at birth.

Wednesday's conversation marks the beginning of the board's process to incorporate the rules into Iowa's [general accreditation standards](https://educateiowa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023-11-15SBE-Rules-Chapter12.pdf), said Heather Doe, the Iowa Department of Education's spokesperson.

Here is what we know about the Iowa Board of Education's proposed rules.

**Do the rules clarify what schools should consider a qualifying sex act for removing a book?**

Yes. The proposed rules bar visual and written depictions of sex acts in books but clarify that references or mentions that do "not describe or visually depict a sex act" are allowable.

**Will there be penalties if schools do not remove books that violate the law?**

Under Senate File 496, schools must remove books that [feature sex acts](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2023/04/30/iowa-school-book-ban-what-is-a-sex-act-which-books-could-be-removed/70138670007/#:~:text=The%20law%20doesn't%20prohibit,between%20two%20or%20more%20people.). Administrators and employees who fail to remove books could face a written reprimand for a first offense. Additional violations could lead to a hearing before the [Iowa Board of Educational Examiners](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2021/05/19/tom-ahart-des-moines-public-schools-superintendent-license-hearing-iowa-board-educational-examiners/5041618001/) and possible disciplinary action.

The new rules, if approved as is, provide some grace.

If a violation is "voluntarily and permanently corrected" before the department makes a decision, officials may "exercise enforcement discretion," [the proposed rules state](https://educateiowa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023-11-15SBE-Rules-Chapter12.pdf).

**Do schools have to track all the books in their libraries?**

Yes. Schools must either make available "a comprehensive list of all books available to all students in libraries offered by the district on its web site in real time" or they must post an updated list "at least two times per calendar year."

School districts can ask for a waiver for two schools years if they do not have an online "card catalogue," said Thomas Mayes, the Iowa Department of Education's general counsel, during the board's meeting.

**Will the state keep a list of removed books?**

No. An earlier version of the education law would have required the Department of Education to maintain a list of books removed from schools, but the final law does not, Mayes told the board.

"I think the more efficient thing is superintendents talking to each other" and sharing information rather than a "master list of books," he said.

The Register is [compiling a list of removed books](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/10/16/database-banned-books-removed-from-iowa-school-libraries-under-new-state-law-senate-file-496/70995919007/), using the open-records law.

## Do the rules address school libraries that serve multiple grades?

Yes. School libraries serving multiple grades are expected to "exercise reasonable physical, administrative and technological controls" to ensure students have access only to materials that are grade and age appropriate.

## What if a book mentions an LGBTQ character?

The rules allow for books to have "neutral" mentions of LGBTQ characters, Mayes said. This includes an "observation regarding a book character's sexual orientation or gender identity that stops short of being a promotion."

The neutral mention is meant as a "safe harbor" for school staff, he said.

## [A Des Moines Register investigation](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/10/16/database-banned-books-removed-from-iowa-school-libraries-under-new-state-law-senate-file-496/70995919007/) shows school district officials across the state have removed children's books under Senate File 496 that mention LGBTQ characters. The removed books include ["Melissa" by Alex Gino](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2023/05/02/alex-gino-talks-about-writing-the-transgender-childrens-book-melissa/70154368007/), "Who Was Harvey Milk?" by Corinne Grinapol and "And Tango Makes Three" by John Richardson and Peter Parnell.

## What about districts that share resources with public libraries?

Ahead of the new school year, about a half-dozen Iowa public school districts and public libraries that share a building or services scrambled to find a way to keep those partnerships intact.

According to the proposal, only library programs operated by a school district are subject to the Board of Education's rules pertaining to Senate File 496.

**Iowa City Press Citizen 10/19/23: The full preliminary list of books coming off shelves in Iowa City schools:**

* "101 Questions about Sex and Sexuality" by Faith Brynie
* "All Boys Aren't Blue" by George M. Johnson
* "American Roommate Experiment" by Elena Armas
* "Beach Read" by Emily Henry
* "Beyond Magenta" by Susan Kuklin
* "Black Girl Unlimited" by Echo Brown
* "Blankets" by Craig Thompson
* "Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison
* "Boy Toy" by Barry Lyga
* "Boyfriend Material" by Alexis Hall
* "Brave Face" by Shaun David Hutchinson
* "Breathless" by Jennifer Niven
* "Can We Talk About Consent" by Justin Hancock
* "Charm Offensive "by Cochrun, Alison
* "Color Purple" by Alice Walker
* "Court of Frost and Starlight" by Sarah Maas
* "Court of Mist and Fury" by Sarah Maas
* "Court of Silver Flames" by Sarah Maas
* "Court of Thorns and Roses" by Sarah Maas
* "Court of Wings and Ruin" by Sarah Maas
* "Crank" by Ellen Hopkins
* "Damsel" by Elana Arnold
* "Doing It: Let's Talk about Sex" by Hannah Witton
* "Empire of Storms" by Sarah J. Maas
* "Forever" by Judy Blume
* "Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" by Stieg Larsson
* "Grown" by Tiffany Jackson
* "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood
* "The Handmaid's Tale" (graphic novel) by Renée Nault
* "Homegoing" by Yaa Gyasi
* "Icebreaker" by Hannah Grace
* "Identical" by Ellen Hopkins
* "Infinite Moment of Us" by Lauren Myracle
* "It" by Stephen King
* "It Ends with Us" by Colleen Hoover
* "It Starts With Us" by Colleen Hoover
* "Kingdom of Ash" by Sarah J. Maas
* "Laughing at My Nightmare" by Shane Burcaw
* "Let's Talk About It" by Erika Moen
* "Looking for Alaska" by John Green
* "Love Hypothesis" by Ali Hazelwood
* "Lucky" by Alice Sebold
* "Making Sexual Decisions" by Kris Gowen
* "Milk and Honey" by Rupi Kaur
* "Nineteen Minutes" by Jodi Picoult
* "No Ashes in the Fire" by Darnell Moore
* "Not That Bad" by Roxane Gay
* "Ordinary Hazards: A Memoir" by Nikki Grimes
* "Out of Darkness" by Ashley Pèrez
* "Perks of Being a Wallflower" by Steven Chbosky
* "Rape of Nanking" by Iris Chang
* "Red, White, and Royal Blue" by Casey McQuiston
* "Sold" by Patrica McCormick
* "Song of Achilles" by Madeline Miller
* "Spanish Love Deception" by Elena Armas
* "Stardust" by Neil Gaiman
* "Thirteen Reasons Why" by Jay Asher
* "This Book is Gay" by Juno Dawson
* "Thousand Acres" by Jane Smiley
* "Tower of Dawn" by Sarah J. Maas
* "Traffick" by Ellen Hopkins
* "Tricks" by Ellen Hopkins
* "Ugly Love" by Colleen Hoover
* "Ulysses" by James Joyce
* "Vincent" by Barbara Stok
* "Water for Elephants" by Sarah Gruen
* "When I was Puerto Rican" by Esmeralda Santiago
* "Y: The Last Man" by Brian K. Vaughan