

**Kashish Bastola
McKinney, Texas**

For the past two years, I have been in frequent attendance at my local school board meetings. I have testified at these local school board meetings as well as before the Texas Senate Committee on Education.

Speaking from my own experience, students and educators are at war with community members seeking to destroy public schools. After my friends and I testified at a school board meeting about book bans, parents and community members harassed students at the meeting and online afterwards. The same thing has happened to the librarians in my school district. Last school year, all of the high school librarians in my school district implemented a reading challenge to promote diverse texts and books which tell the side of the oppressed. The backlash, which came from a loud minority of parents, not only interfered with the reading program, but became increasingly violent and extreme in nature. Suddenly, "Critical Race Theory" became a catch-all phrase for everything this group of parents disliked, such as social and emotional learning. At nearly every street corner on my way to school, work, the grocery store, or my local library, I see a school board candidate's sign that says "say no to CRT." Conspiracies of Critical Race Theory being taught in our public schools is an attack on our local democracy and must be condemned for the ramifications caused by deceiving the public.

In the fall of 2020, a friend and I urged my school district to adopt its first ever ethnic studies course. Soon after, I learned that what students were demanding was deemed Critical Race Theory by a group of parents. After months of working with the district, it felt so great when the African American Studies course was passed by the school board. However, it feels as though our freedom of inquiry as students is being chipped away at with each CRT scare and book ban. Teachers and students are caught in the middle as titles are pulled off of our bookshelves. It seems as though our elected officials don't want all students to have the opportunity to have their stories reflected in the texts they read. It seems as though they are depriving all students of the opportunity to learn about something they have never lived through.

As a high school senior preparing to graduate, I can tell you that I have never seen teachers more worn out and distressed. There used to never be this type of tension and censorship in the classroom when discussing uncomfortable topics. Students have lost so much in this culture war, and I just wish these legislators would take a moment to think about how their actions impact us in the classroom. Over the past few years, I have watched the resiliency of my teachers to educate me and my peers during mounting crises. But we have exploited our educators far too much now. Our elected officials have relegated educators to a thankless, subservient position which has no regard for the expertise they bring to our public schools. So many of my teachers are on the brink of leaving the profession, and I am quite honestly fearful for the future of public education in the State of Texas and across the United States. Thank you.

Adunni L. Noibi
Suwanee, Georgia

As a young Black American, I have grown to learn the importance of being educated. I know the importance of true and raw history. Learning about horrors like slavery and discrimination is never pleasant—but it is powerful. It is what binds us together as we look forward to America's future and strive to make it one where we can all succeed. School is the place for us to learn, grow, and thrive. It's where we equip the youngest Americans to build our future.

When I open a book and read about characters that look like me, it uplifts me and leaves me feeling empowered. When I open a book and read about the history that many Americans lived through, it leaves me feeling grateful that we as a country have moved far away from that violence. It leaves me hopeful, although we have a long way to go. Getting to read about current experiences that I, along with many other young Americans, can deeply relate to is equally important. Students deserve to be educated on issues, experiences, and history, but banning books puts students like me at risk of losing that knowledge. As a student, it concerns me that politicians are posing book bans as “protecting students” when these book bans are hurting us.

The push to ban books is a push to erase history and experiences that many young Americans, like me, face daily. These bans silence the voices of people across America. They send a message that undermines the voices and experiences of people of color and LGBTQ+ Americans. It tells people like me that we aren't American enough and that our experiences are invalid. My peers and I spend our afternoons fighting and advocating against book bans and classroom censorship in Georgia. We watch as our representatives and state politicians fight against our right to learn from quality material and educate ourselves. Titles like *The Hate U Give* or *The Bluest Eye* express the reality of living as a Black person in America, a reality that I face daily. Yet politicians are attempting to remove these books from my school shelves. Students from groups like The Georgia Youth Justice Coalition testified daily during this past legislative session, fighting for our right to learn from books that highlight experiences to which many of us can relate. We fought daily by calling, emailing, and showing up at our state capitol to protest and speak to our representatives. We spent our evenings writing pieces, trying to tell our stories and advocate for books that we found value in. We shouldn't have to do this, but we will continue fighting for our right to learn, grow, and thrive in our schools.