

Book challenges are on the rise. Westlake schools created a public database to track them.



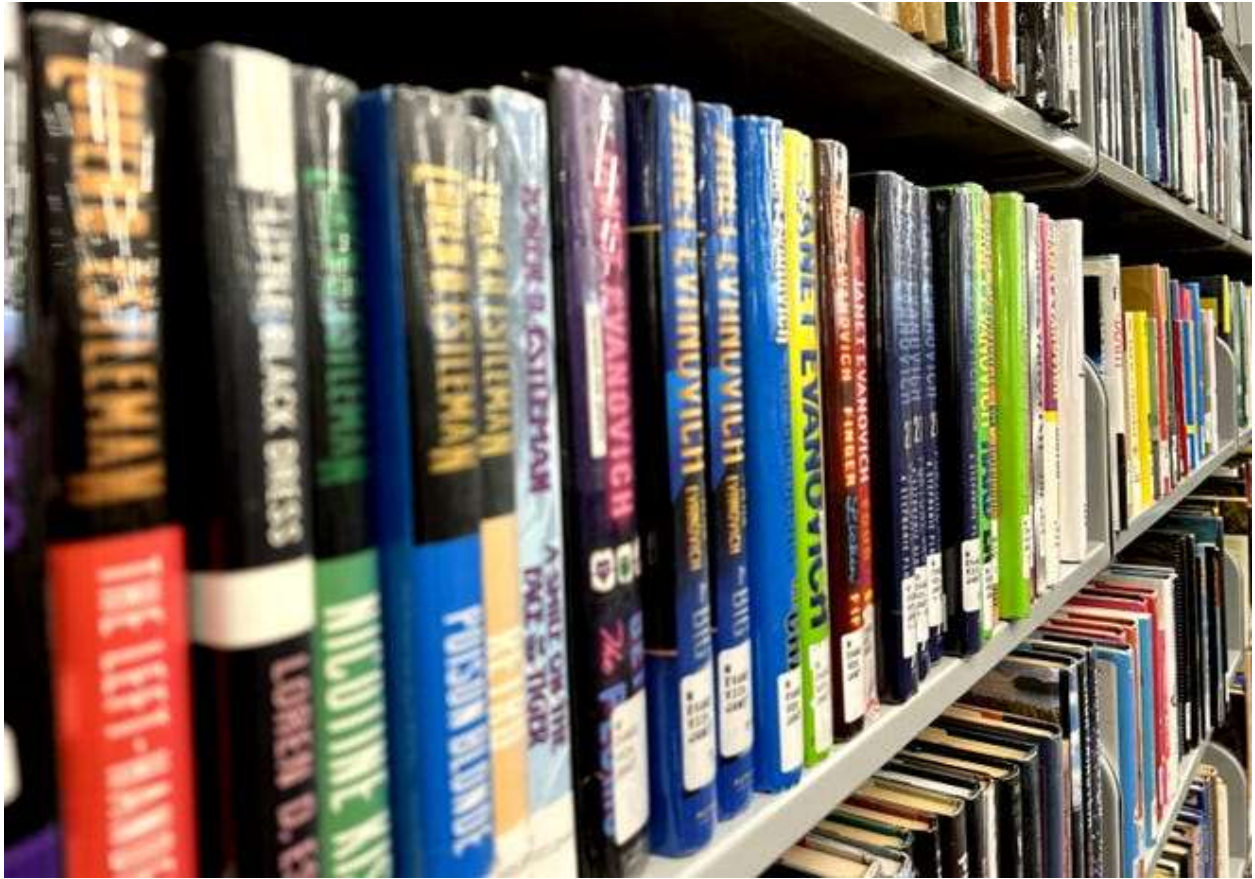
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Westlake schools have seen a significant increase in book challenges in recent weeks, receiving 129 new challenges between March 28 and May 1. The list includes everything from Sara J. Mass' fantasy romance books to the Bible. By contrast, the district received just five challenges in 2021. Before that, the most recent challenge was submitted in 2018.

Molly May, the Eanes school district's assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction and assessment, said the administration decided to create a public database to share information about the book challenges and review process for the sake of transparency. The district also adjusted the book review process to accommodate the flood of new complaints.

The database shows which books have been challenged, as well as the date and status of each challenge. The district chose to include the name of the person who submitted the challenge, which has been controversial with some parents. Once the district makes a decision regarding the fate of the challenged book, the document explaining that decision is also posted. Challenges can be submitted via an online form on the district's website.



“The submitter has to either be a parent in the district, a resident in the district or a staff member in the district,” May said. “They need to provide their name and their address.”

May said the database is work for staff to maintain, but it cuts back on the number of open records requests the district receives asking for documents related to book challenges.

Eanes ISD trying to be ‘as transparent as possible’ with book challenges

Of the 135 book challenges that have been submitted to the district in the past four years — the vast majority of which were submitted in recent weeks — 77 are for books at the high school level. Forty-five challenges concern titles in middle school libraries and 13 related to titles at the elementary level.

The challenges encompass 95 books. A little under half of the books challenged deal with themes related to race, racism and/or the LGBTQ community.

Book challenges rose steeply nationwide last year. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 729 challenges to library, school and university materials in 2021, resulting in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals, a significant increase from past years. The association, which fights against book bans and challenges, reported that most targeted books were by or about Black or LGBTQ people.

According to the Eanes database, 13 people and one organization submitted the 135 challenges. Parent Ivana Silva, who declined the Statesman's request for comment, submitted the most, at 61 challenges. Moms for Liberty, Travis County Eanes — which submitted challenges before the district switched to an online form requiring an individual's name in April — sent in 17.

May said the decision to include the name of the parent or organization who submitted the challenge — which already was available through a public records request — was also made with transparency in mind.

“We're just trying to be as transparent in the process as possible,” she said. “It was an administrative decision, with some collaboration with the board, on what we wanted to post.”

Brian Talley, who has three children in the district, said he is all for transparency but feels that including the challenger's names is a violation of privacy. Talley submitted five book challenges last spring and said he was never told his challenge form would be put on a public database. The database blacks out Talley's address, contact info and signature.

“I stand by my words, and I'm not afraid to speak my mind and where I stand,” he said. “I personally believe that they blasted (the database over email) right before the election to basically intimidate parents.”

District spokesperson Claudia McWhorter said staff worked on the database for several weeks and there was no connection between when it went live and the election. The new online challenge form also includes a disclaimer that the information on the form may be accessed by the public.

Talley said he would like the name of the librarian or staff member who approved the purchase of the book for the district included in the database, along with the parent who is challenging the book.

Cedar Creek librarian Shannon Foley, who also serves as the district's lead librarian, said there is no secrecy behind who selects the books for each campus because book purchasing is the purview of the librarian. Librarians typically consult book reviews and look for books that will be popular with students or fill gaps in the collection, Foley said.

Foley said it might be hard to find the name of the librarian employed years ago, but for more recent purchases it is easy to find the name of the librarian at each campus online. McWhorter said that staff have been looking at past book purchase orders and the paperwork does not contain the name of the person who put in the order.

The five books Talley challenged all dealt with issues of race and racism in ways he said were inappropriate and politically biased for the public school system. After going through the book challenge process with a review committee, the district decided four of the five books were appropriate to remain in libraries. The fifth book — "How to be an Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi — was not available to students at the middle school level where it was challenged and therefore was not reviewed.

Talley said he wants books he feels are politically biased or contain sexual content to be removed from the shelves. He said the issue of books in schools is part of a wider political struggle over the public school system.

“I just want them to get politics out of the school,” he said. “Sexual, profane, vile, inappropriate materials, that isn't something that parents should have to ask to get out of the school. That should be the responsibility of the school to adhere to general standards of ethics.”

The review process for Westlake book bans

The district formed a committees this year to review challenged titles at the high school, middle school and elementary school levels. The committees — which the district says will follow longstanding board policy in their review process — include a librarian, a campus administrator, a district administrator, a school staff member and parents. May said the district is collecting names of parents who want to be part of this process.

The district purchases a copy of the book for each committee member and gives them a month to read it. The committee then discusses the book's literary merit, age appropriateness, the perspectives it represents and what it adds to the library collection as a whole.

Foley said librarians are trained to build collections that are age appropriate for the campus and include diverse topics.

“We have such a broad collection because we're supporting such a huge range of interests, abilities and ages,” she said. “Not every book in the library is good for every kid because not every kid is the same.”

May said that review committee decisions are binding for five years but appeals can be made if the committee did not follow the board's policy correctly.

The influx of challenges has a financial impact on the district, May said, since copies of challenged books have to be purchased for the committee members. There is also an impact on staff, who are spending their free time outside of school reading these books.

"We'll try to read one book per level per month, excluding holidays and summers. So we're looking at probably getting around eight books per level per year," May said. "Everyone on the committee reads these books at night and on the weekends. We don't have time during our work day to sit and read a novel."

Because the district is small and has a limited number of librarians, May said, it is not feasible to increase the number of committees to make the process go faster and still have the needed staff expertise included.

At the current rate of review, it will take the district years to process the challenges that have already been submitted, May said. Board policy dictates that books cannot be removed while a challenge is underway but individual parents can restrict their children's access to certain titles at any time by contacting the school librarian.