



# EDUCATIONAL GAG ORDERS IN YOUR COMMUNITY: CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Educational gag orders are sweeping the country. These legislative restrictions on the freedom to read, learn, and teach threaten free expression and academic freedom in the classroom and limit the ideas and perspectives students can discuss and understand. If you live in the United States, it's likely that your state legislature or school district has either passed an educational gag order or is considering doing so.

Want to help combat this threat to free expression, but don't know where to start? Here are a few steps you can take as a citizen to help change the conversation in your community.

## 1. FIND LOCAL ALLIES.

In most communities, you won't be the only person opposed to educational gag orders. Read news articles, look online, or ask around to find groups or organizations that oppose these censorious bills. Check in with local libraries, educators' groups, civil rights organizations, PTAs, and other groups that care about free expression, like local journalists and publications, arts organizations and institutions, or even a PEN Across America chapter. Find out what they're doing and how you can help. Supporting the freedom to learn is more effective and enjoyable when people work together and amplify one another's voices.

## 2. FRAME YOUR MESSAGE CAREFULLY.

When engaging in a conversation about educational gag orders, consider framing your message to win adherents from all walks of life. Polls show that broad majorities of Americans support both free speech and teaching the honest history of the United States, including slavery and the experiences of racial and sexual minorities. They also support reasonable accountability for teachers and parents' involvement in their children's education. Your message is strongest when you can affirm what most people already believe about students' right to learn.



# TIP SHEET

## **3. TALK TO YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND NEIGHBORS.**

One of the most effective ways to promote dialogue in your community is to begin it yourself. Consider initiating open and respectful conversations with your family and friends. Find out their views on educational gag orders, and explain yours. If they agree with your views, you can encourage them to speak out. If they disagree, they will still benefit from learning that someone they know personally is on the “other side.” If they offer up misinformation, counter it calmly and respectfully.

## **4. WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR OR AN OP-ED IN YOUR LOCAL PAPER.**

If you live in an area with a local paper, it may offer an opportunity to educate your fellow community members on educational gag orders. When a news story appears about a bill under consideration in your state, or a policy at your local school board, write a brief letter to the editor expressing your concerns. Many local papers also accept longer opinion pieces from readers; these are often shared online and can be an especially effective way of changing the conversation in your community.

If you don't feel comfortable or safe speaking publicly about educational gag orders, it's okay to put your own livelihood or safety first. You can still speak with friends and family and help shape the narrative in private conversations.

## **5. FIND SUPPORT AND PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST ONLINE HARASSMENT.**

Women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately targeted by online abuse—and educators and students have been targeted for fighting against censorship.

If you are subjected to online hate and harassment, remember that abuse is intended to intimidate and silence you. Abuse is not your fault, and you are not alone. Be sure to take a look at PEN America's Field Manual against Online Harassment, which outlines abusive tactics and offers guidance on how to prepare, respond, take care of yourself, and find support.

## **6. DON'T BE DISCOURAGED.**

Some educational gag orders have already become law, and more will likely follow. Don't be discouraged. Change can take a long time, but the history of censorious legislation in the past—such as the McCarthy Era of the 1950s and the Red Scare after World War I—shows that many bans and prohibitions are eventually reversed.

That happens in large part because people like you speak up when it matters, emphasizing the importance of free expression and the right to learn as democratic values. So keep up the good work!