



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Trends in Intellectual Freedom Challenges - 2025

Date: May 26, 2025

To: Toronto Public Library Board

From: City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide the Library Board with information about recent trends in intellectual freedom challenges in North America. Intellectual freedom is a fundamental principle and core value for public libraries, which means:

- supporting and facilitating the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society; and
- respecting each individual's rights to privacy and choice.

Libraries have been a democratizing force in the modern world. Democracy is preserved by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions and ideas, including those that some consider unacceptable, unconventional or unpopular, provided of course, that these expressions are not violating any laws.

In 2024, targeted intellectual freedom challenges from organized groups continued an upward trend from previous years, accounting for 72% of the 821 challenges reported to the American Library Association (ALA). At Toronto Public Library (TPL), the number of challenges remains low; however, a growing trend is emerging across Canada that reflects a broader societal discourse contesting the rights of equity-deserving groups.

Another growing trend reported by ALA is the increased number of laws related to library operations and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

In response, TPL, along with other libraries throughout North America, have undertaken numerous initiatives to protect, defend and promote the freedom to read and freedom of expression through the breadth and diversity of its collections and services, and also through a number of advocacy and education initiatives.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact beyond what has already been approved in the current year's budget.

The Director, Finance & CFO has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

Toronto Public Library's continued work of providing universal access to knowledge, ideas and opinions that represent and amplify the voices of the communities it serves and meet the changing needs of Torontonians advances TPL's strategic priority of being recognized internationally as the centre for social connection, community dialogue and strengthening democratic values.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

By defending and intentionally embedding the practice of intellectual freedom in its work, TPL continues to ensure spaces, collections, and services reach, engage and reflect equity-deserving groups and help them express and amplify

their voices; and advocate for and actively break down barriers to information, information literacy and platforms for expression.

DECISION HISTORY

At its March 24, 2024 meeting the Library Board received the [Intellectual Freedom Challenges – 2023 Annual Report](#).

At its September 18, 2023 meeting the Library Board approved the revised [Community and Event Space Rental Policy](#), which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement and incorporates the request for reconsideration process.

At its June 19, 2023 meeting the Library Board approved the [Request for Reconsideration and Administrative Updates](#) for the Programming and Library Space for Art Exhibits policies, which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement and incorporates the request for reconsideration process.

At its January 23, 2023 meeting the Library Board approved the updated [Materials Selection Policy](#), which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement, and an updated version of the Ontario Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Rights of the Individual.

At its December 5, 2022 meeting the Library Board approved the report presenting the [Intellectual Freedom and Equity Statements](#), as two mutually reinforcing statements that recognize TPL's role in supporting these foundational principles.

At its December 5, 2022 meeting the Library Board approved the report, [Trends in Intellectual Freedom Challenges](#), and reaffirmed its commitment to the Canadian Federation of Library Association's (CFLA) Statement on Intellectual Freedom and endorsed the Urban Library Council's Declaration of Democracy.

At its June 26, 2000 meeting the Library Board endorsed the Canadian Library Association's Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom as part of its approval of the Materials Selection Policy.

At its June 27, 2016 meeting the Library Board endorsed the Canadian Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries as part of its approval of the report: [Materials Selection Policy – 2016 Revisions](#).

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Intellectual freedom is a fundamental principle and core value for public libraries. Libraries have been a democratizing force in the modern world promoting literacy and a literate population, free and open access to a diversity of information and ideas, supporting intellectual freedom, lifelong learning, preserving the past and protecting personal privacy.

At Toronto Public Library, intellectual freedom means supporting and facilitating the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society and respecting each individual's rights to privacy and choice. Democracy is preserved by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions and ideas, including those, which some consider unacceptable, unconventional or unpopular, provided of course, these expressions are not violating any laws.

This trends report uses American data provided by the American Library Association's *State of America's Libraries: A snapshot of 2024¹* report, and Canadian trends from the Centre for Free Expression's library challenges database related to intellectual freedom challenges at public libraries.

ALA has collected reports of intellectual freedom challenges from American libraries since 1967. In Canada, the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) and CFLA Intellectual Freedom Challenges Database provides a publicly accessible database containing 26 years of public library challenges, along with the suggested resolutions and corresponding library responses.

TPL reports Intellectual Freedom Challenges annually to the Board. These include requests for reconsideration from customers related to venue rentals, art exhibits, programs, events and collections.

¹ <https://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2025>

COMMENTS

In 2024, targeted intellectual freedom challenges from organized groups continued an upward trend from previous years, accounting for 72% of the 821 challenges reported to the American Library Association (ALA). At Toronto Public Library, the number of challenges remains low; however, a growing trend is emerging across Canada that reflects a broader societal discourse contesting the rights of equity-deserving groups.

Challenges in the United States

Data from ALA's *State of America's Libraries: A Snapshot of 2024*² reveals a growing trend of challenges to intellectual freedom by organized groups attempting to censor library materials and services from library users:

- From 2000-2020 the total number of targeted title challenges reported to ALA annually was 46. In contrast, in 2024 alone, 4,190 titles were reported to ALA.
- 55% of challenges were directed at public libraries in the United States, primarily targeting titles by or about members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Additionally, 624 title challenges were aimed at works representing historically underrepresented voices, including Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

Another growing trend reported by ALA is the increased number of laws related to library operations and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. Some of these new laws restrict readers' access to information, including eliminating or restricting library staff involvement in developing collections. Other laws affirm readers' First Amendment rights and protect the freedom to read and library staff adhering to intellectual freedom in their work. The directives to dismantle and restrict diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives is and will continue to have an impact on collections, programming and services at public libraries immediately impacting the resources customers are able to access. A

² <https://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2025>

permanent gap in access is widening as publishers increasingly self-censor, limiting what libraries can consider for inclusion in their collections

On May 8th, 2025, Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, was dismissed from the position she held since 2016. There have been many statements and media reports on the impact Dr. Hayden's work has had on expanding digital reach, and championing access and transparency. As stated in the [Urban Library Council's statement](#), *"At a time when truth, history, and civic knowledge are under strain, Dr. Hayden stands as a steadfast advocate for open information and the enduring value of public institutions. Her leadership reminds us that libraries are, at their core, dynamic engines of democracy, equity, and the public good."* The stated reasons for dismissal included a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion through efforts to ensure the library's collection represented the broadest range of works possible, as well as concerns regarding the presence of books in the non-lending library that some considered inappropriate for children.

Challenges in Canada

In 2024, the Canadian Library Challenges Database received 119 challenge reports. At TPL, four requests for reconsideration were received in 2024 as reported in its [Intellectual Freedom Challenges - 2024 Annual Report](#).

Libraries in Canada continue to face challenges on a wide range of issues, and not just to physical books and other collection materials (historically where libraries have faced the most challenges). These other challenges include programs, e-content, internet access, room bookings, decals, displays and exhibits.

Intellectual Freedom at TPL

TPL stands with other libraries to promote and defend the freedom to read and freedom of expression through the breadth and diversity of its collections and services, and also through a number of advocacy and education initiatives. In 2024, these efforts included the award winning '[What's at Stake](#)' advocacy campaign and programming series.

System-wide, library staff lead intellectual freedom programming and advocacy initiatives including:

National public streamed and live events

- Hosting a national event designed specifically for North American library staff, discussing public spaces and democratic values.
- Co-sponsorship of [Centre for Free Expression](#) programming focusing on intellectual freedom.

Advocacy leadership

- Supporting other public libraries with their intellectual freedom challenges and policy development.
- Working members of both the Centre for Free Expression and Canadian Federation of Library Associations Intellectual Freedom Committees.

Policy and procedures support and training

- Support staff throughout the system in the implementation of policy and guidelines related to intellectual freedom and operational procedures.
- Rollout of the Intellectual Freedom 101 training course to management and staff.

Conference presentations

- Presentation about democracy and intellectual freedom at the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) Metropolitan Libraries Conference in Barcelona.

Programs, parades and displays

- [TPL Pride Parade](#) presence featuring the theme of intellectual freedom.
- Ongoing [Civil Forums](#) focused on intellectual freedom in the face of war, legal harassment, misinformation and censorship.

CONCLUSION

Increases in targeted intellectual freedom challenges, conversations and protests throughout North America have continued in 2024. Efforts to

challenge and censor content takes many forms, and requests have targeted books, programs and other events. Libraries and their allies are standing up and speaking out to protect intellectual freedom and ensure the voices of marginalized and equity-deserving communities are not shut down.

TPL's core value of intellectual freedom guarantees and facilitates the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society, protecting intellectual freedom and respecting individuals' rights to privacy and choice. TPL is committed to being a vital democratic institution that advocates and provides a platform for intellectual freedom and freedom of expression, and space for discussion, debate and civic engagement. TPL facilitates and defends access to information to ensure everyone has equal and unfettered access to information in all its forms. The library will continue to take a leadership role in protecting and defending intellectual freedom.

Discussion, debate and civic engagement are supported by collections, programs, spaces and services that reflect the reality and experiences of community members.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

Vickery Bowles
City Librarian

ATTACHMENTS

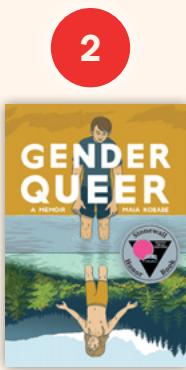
Attachment 1: 2024 Top 10 Challenged Titles from ALA

TOP 10 MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2024

The American Library Association documented **821 attempts to censor** materials and services at libraries, schools, and universities in 2024. The most common reasons for challenges were false claims of illegal obscenity for minors; inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters or themes; and dealing with topics of race, racism, inclusivity, equity, and social justice. Of the **2,452 unique titles** that were challenged or banned in 2024, here are the top 10 most frequently targeted.



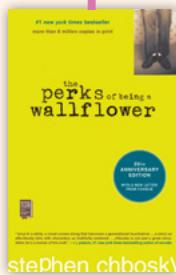
All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto
by George M. Johnson
Why this book matters: bit.ly/allboysBR



Gender Queer: A Memoir
by Maia Kobabe
Why this book matters: bit.ly/genderBR



The Bluest Eye
by Toni Morrison
Why this book matters: bit.ly/bluestBR



The Perks of Being a Wallflower
by Stephen Chbosky
Why this book matters: bit.ly/wallflowerBR



Tricks
by Ellen Hopkins
Why this book matters: bit.ly/tricksBR

1

2

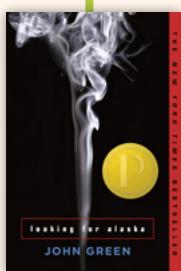
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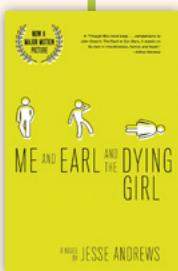
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10



Looking for Alaska
by John Green
Why this book matters: bit.ly/alaskaBR



Me and Earl and the Dying Girl
by Jesse Andrews
Why this book matters: bit.ly/earlBR



Crank
by Ellen Hopkins
Why this book matters: bit.ly/crankBR



Sold
by Patricia McCormick
Why this book matters: bit.ly/soldBR



Flamer
by Mike Curato
Why this book matters: bit.ly/flamerBR



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Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association

