**Headline:** How Books Can Be Used to Build Up America or to Divide It

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

Families from miles around lined up outside the United Steelworkers (USW) hall in Tonawanda, New York, a few years ago, eager for a share of the 30,000 books, from biographies to sci-fi thrillers, that Tom O’Shei and other union members handed out for free.

The hugely popular giveaway was a logical undertaking for a civic-minded union that recognized a local need and understood that sharing knowledge would help build a stronger community from the grassroots up.

But while union members like O’Shei continue to harness the power of the written word to unify and bolster their hometowns, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis opted to weaponize books in an attempt to divide and dominate.

Under the right-wing Republican’s censorship, classroom libraries remain off limits to students until [state-trained watchdogs vet the books](https://www.wfit.org/education/2023-02-05/book-ban-in-floridas-public-schools-rankles-many?_amp=true) to ensure they conform to DeSantis’s [politics of hate](https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2023/01/25/dcps-errs-on-the-side-of-caution-in-clearing-schools-of-content-condemned-by-desantis-administration/).

Local school boards across Florida ostensibly have the final word on approving or banning instructional materials, but they know that taking a responsible and inclusive approach means incurring the [vindictive](https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/03/ron-densantis-students-masks) DeSantis’s wrath.

Adding insult to injury, teachers face criminal prosecution, thousands of dollars in fines, and [five years in prison](https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/book-bans-florida-public-schools/) for giving children access to [unapproved titles](https://www.teamduval.org/2023/01/23/district-taking-further-steps-to-comply-with-florida-laws-on-library-books/). A conviction under this [draconian policy](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/florida-book-bans-ron-desantis-b2273922.html) also threatens a teacher’s [career](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/01/31/florida-hide-books-stop-woke-manatee-county-duval-county-desantis/) and [voting rights](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/florida-book-bans-ron-desantis-b2273922.html).

“To me, it’s almost like trying to exercise mind control,” O’Shei, president of Local 135L, said of DeSantis’s efforts to police libraries and indoctrinate students. “Anybody who wants to ban books doesn’t have your best interest at heart.”

“When I see something like that, I would encourage kids to go to the community library and find out what they don’t want you to read,” said O’Shei.

Local 135L, which represents hundreds of workers at the Sumitomo plant in Tonawanda, considers community building an essential part of USW membership.

“We have to be good members of the community because we’re lucky enough to have a good living because of the union,” O’Shei tells new workers at the tire plant. “We want to make the community around us a better place to live, too.”

Although neighbors welcomed the [diapers, coats, toys, food, and other items](https://m.usw.org/news/media-center/articles/2018/usw-cares-2018-district-4-jefferson-award-winner-local-union-350l) the union distributed over the years, the book giveaway—open to all families—proved a runaway hit.

Children and parents hungrily pored over the volumes that Local 135L, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and the Kenmore Teachers Association teamed up to distribute first at the union hall and then at a local market and to schools and nonprofits.

While DeSantis intends to control what students read, the union members aimed to present families with as many topics, voices, and choices as possible.

“No indoctrination here,” O’Shei said of the event, which included biographies on figures as diverse as abolitionist Harriet Tubman, labor leader Cesar Chavez, and former President John Adams.

The assault on classroom libraries represents one front in DeSantis’s scorched-earth campaign to divide communities and marginalize certain Americans.

He also [attacked](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/02/01/ap-african-american-studies-curriculum-desantis/) the College Board’s new Advanced Placement course on African American studies, [banned dozens of math textbooks](https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/05/fldoe-releases-math-textbook-reviews-00030503) because of references to discrimination and other racial issues, [rolled out plans to scrap diversity, equity, and inclusion programs](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/02/ron-desantis-block-dei-program-state-colleges-florida) at state colleges, and [dictated](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/01/21/florida-black-history-ron-desantis/) how educators talk about race and [LGBTQ+](https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis) issues.

“He’s gone off the deep end. Everything he’s done is just red meat for the MAGA crowd. It’s disgusting,” observed Jim Centner, a Florida resident and District 9 coordinator for the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR).

Outraged Floridians are [joining forces](https://www.npr.org/2023/01/25/1151376707/advanced-placement-african-american-studies-desantis-crump-lawsuit) to [roll back](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ron-desantis-stop-woke-act-blocked-florida-judge/) these extremist policies.

But in the meantime, “what he’s doing is [whitewashing history](https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-south/why-some-florida-schools-are-removing-books-from-their-libraries) and taking us back to pre-civil rights,” Centner pointed out. “It’s like we’re going back to the ’60s here. It’s going to hold the students in this state back from experiencing life. It’s very divisive, and it’s destroying education in this state.”

Such policies outrage Ayrel Evans, a member of USW Local 8599 and a library specialist for the Fontana (California) Unified School District, who’s dedicated her life to empowering children from diverse backgrounds.

Evans marks Black History Month, National Hispanic Heritage Month, and other celebrations of diversity to validate her students’ own experiences, introduce them to new perspectives, and encourage them to dream big.

In addition to working with students from many racial and ethnic backgrounds, she meets the needs of children with disabilities, children in foster homes, those just beginning to learn English, and those hailing from diverse family structures.

And she regularly connects students of all backgrounds with books that help them make sense of current events unfolding close to home and around the world.

“You can see in their eyes that they want to know more information,” explained Evans, noting that book banning robs children of opportunities to make their own decisions and ultimately sets them up for failure in a globally competitive environment.

“We’re not preparing our students for the future. We’re not preparing them to see something different outside their bubble,” she said. “With books, there’s an opportunity for conversation. If you take away the books, no conversation is being had.”

Evans has great empathy for Florida educators and families stifled by DeSantis’s extremism. If that kind of threat ever faced her district, she said, “I’d be on the front lines fighting against that.”

“Working around this much information puts me in a position where I’m always learning,” she added. “I never want to be in a situation where I think I know everything. That’s my desire and my goal for students.”