

# Are Public School Libraries Accomplishing Their Mission?

## Public School Libraries Do Not Appear to Stock a Balance of Views

BY NEAL McCLUSKEY

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past couple of years, school districts nationwide have seen a wave of challenges to books in libraries and on reading lists, as well as rising demands to know what titles are in schools. These challenges and demands have put public school libraries under significant scrutiny and raised fundamental questions about their purpose and operation. Many people likely expect that these libraries stock diverse viewpoints, which is at least somewhat how groups such as the American Library Association have framed their missions. This expectation is also what the U.S. Supreme Court has approached but not set as precedent, for lack of majority agreement.

This policy analysis discusses the country's public school library situation, including who is supposed to control holdings and how acquisition works. Then it reports on a

small experiment to address three questions: (1) Can the public see which books are in libraries; (2) do libraries contain potentially controversial books; and (3) can students access diverse views?

Searching for books with contrasting perspectives on race and American history, we found evidence that the public can typically view library holdings; most districts do not provide access to the books we selected; and when controversial titles are present, there is a liberal-leaning imbalance. Most glaringly, the liberal book *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* was in libraries serving 135 schools, or about 39 percent of those searchable, while counterpoint *Woke Racism* was in 1 school, or less than 1 percent of the total. This paper discusses possible reasons for this imbalance, policy suggestions, and limitations of our approach.



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## INTRODUCTION

If *Time* were to pick a Person of the Year in education, it might well be the public school librarian. Disputes about books in libraries and parent access to information about what kids are exposed to in schools have been burning since at least fall 2021, when a mother’s complaint at a Fairfax County, Virginia, school board meeting about the presence of the book *Gender Queer: A Memoir*—with literally graphic depictions of sexual activity—went viral. These battles have brought public school libraries under intense scrutiny, with many people wanting to know whether they are tools for “indoctrinating” children with values and ideas that many parents find objectionable.

“While disputes about library holdings and reading assignments have always been a part of public schooling, the country entered an especially contentious period around fall 2021.”

The debate takes place with a muddled understanding of the mission and operation of public school libraries. The closest we have to a bright line about what public school libraries should do and who should have control over them is the 1982 Supreme Court case *Island Trees Union School District v. Pico*, in which a plurality of justices said that public school libraries have a First Amendment mission to give students access to a wide breadth of views. As a plurality opinion, this did not establish precedent, and even if it did, the opinion did not clearly lay out when a school board, the democratically elected representatives of a district’s population, can remove a book. Even more importantly, the plurality said it was intentionally silent on book acquisitions—how books enter libraries to begin with. Meanwhile, guidance to librarians from groups such as the American Library Association (ALA) often promotes incorporating diverse viewpoints but is unclear about who should ultimately decide what is on library shelves and the importance of ideological—as opposed to demographic—diversity.

To get a sense for the situation on the ground, this paper lays out the current library debate and guidance for how book

acquisitions should work. It then reports the findings from an experiment sampling 200 randomly selected, traditional public school districts (no charter schools or specialty districts) to see if libraries stock ideologically diverse perspectives. We attempted to search libraries serving one middle and one high school in each district, intentionally selecting specific books with contrasting ideological perspectives on U.S. history and race—one of the hottest battlefronts in education. We categorized one set of books as “liberal” and the other as “conservative.” We did this for ease of discussing ideological balance, not because the authors would necessarily describe their views using those terms.

We address three major questions:

1. Can members of the public see which books are in school libraries?
2. Do school libraries have books that are potentially controversial?
3. Do school libraries balance perspectives?

We found that 85 percent of schools had associated libraries that were searchable online by members of the public, though determining how to access and search catalogs was sometimes difficult. Of schools connected to a searchable library, only 49 percent had access to at least one of the potentially controversial titles for which we searched. Finally, and arguably most important, we found that when libraries had one or more of the titles for which we searched, very few provided ideological balance. Sixteen had conservative but no liberal books, and 133 had liberal but no conservative books—a significant liberal slant. This would seem to violate at least the spirit of the Supreme Court plurality opinion that public school libraries should be places where students can access a full range of thought. That said, we used a small number of primarily nonfiction books, specifically to try to assess ideological balance in library holdings. These books also tended to be geared to readers in middle school and above. We did not capture the full range of potentially controversial books, including for our particular theme, that libraries could stock.<sup>1</sup>

## THE SITUATION

Debates about reading material in public schools are older than American public schooling itself, with founding

generation members Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster, for instance, disagreeing about whether the Bible should be used in public schools even as they were sketching out the idea of American public schooling.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Bible-focused battles punctuated much of public schooling history, first as Catholics and Protestants tussled over whose version should be read, then as people asked the broader question of whether the Bible should be read in public schools at all, with the Supreme Court prohibiting reading it for devotional purposes in 1963.<sup>3</sup> Numerous other books have also been lightning rods, from the N-word-filled *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the LGBTQ+-embracing *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

While disputes about library holdings and reading assignments have always been a part of public schooling, the country entered an especially contentious period around fall 2021, likely due to a confluence of long-term and short-term phenomena.

Long term, the country has been going through major demographic and cultural changes for several decades. Between 2000 and 2020, the U.S. population changed from 71 percent non-Hispanic white to about 58 percent.<sup>4</sup> Support for gay marriage skyrocketed from 27 percent of Americans in 1996 to 77 percent in 2021.<sup>5</sup> The share of people belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque dropped from 70 percent in 1999 to 47 percent in 2020.<sup>6</sup> These transformations likely made moral and cultural clashes more common in society and schools.

Shorter term, the country has been increasingly dealing with matters of race, crime, and police misconduct since the fatal shooting of black teenager Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in 2012 in Sanford, Florida. That was followed by several deadly police interactions with African Americans, including the asphyxiation of Eric Garner in New York City in 2014; the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014; the shooting of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2020; and the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020. The latter motivated many school leaders to issue statements declaring that they would undertake concerted efforts to combat systemic racism and increase equity to ameliorate conditions that they believed were producing such incidents.<sup>7</sup> Some people saw these efforts as timely or overdue, while others viewed them as smearing the country and elevating race over colorblind equality under the law.

Added to these events was the 2019 publication of the “1619 Project,” a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* that declared 1619, the year the first enslaved Africans arrived in North America, the country’s “true founding.”<sup>8</sup> This helped ignite controversy over the basic framing of America’s history: was the country based on oppression or liberty? This framing spurred nationwide skirmishes over history standards; diversity, equity, and inclusion policies; and reading materials. The “1619 Project” itself became a major controversy in schools, with the Pulitzer Center creating a curriculum to put the project’s ideas into K–12 education and many states seeing legislation forbidding its use in public schools.<sup>9</sup>

## “This debate suggests two questions: What is the purpose of public school libraries? And in light of that purpose, how is book acquisition supposed to work?”

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these tensions and frayed nerves generally. While the pandemic initially reduced values- and identity-based conflicts in public schools—delivering *any* instruction became the overwhelming concern—coping with COVID-19 itself became a highly polarizing matter.<sup>10</sup> Often breaking along liberal and conservative lines, many intense debates broke out, first about whether to reopen schools to in-person instruction and then whether to do so with masking and vaccination mandates.

The next major event sparking the current warfare over reading material was very specific: the September 2021 presentation by local mother Stacy Langton at a school board meeting in Fairfax County, Virginia.<sup>11</sup> Langton showed images and read passages from *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, and read passages from *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison. Both books contain graphic depictions of sexual activity between men and minors. (Literally graphic in the former, because *Gender Queer* is a graphic novel.) The school board shut off Langton’s microphone on the grounds that the content she was sharing was inappropriate for children who might be watching, while the board chair noted that the books were on high school stacks

only.<sup>12</sup> The clash seemed to ignite a national movement to remove books with overt sexual and racial themes from schools. In 2021, *Gender Queer* was the most challenged book in public libraries, followed by *Lawn Boy*.<sup>13</sup>

## THE PURPOSE AND PROCESSES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL LIBRARIES

This debate suggests two questions: What is the purpose of public school libraries? And in light of that purpose, how is book acquisition supposed to work?

As mentioned, the closest public schools get to national legal guidance is the Supreme Court ruling in *Island Trees*. The case involved the school board of Island Trees, New York, removing several books from middle and high school libraries on the grounds that they were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy.”<sup>14</sup> The plurality opinion of the Court was that the district violated the First Amendment, reasoning that the books in public school libraries, unlike those chosen for classroom reading assignments, enable students to access diverse ideas to pursue truth *themselves*. Given this purpose of school libraries—to be places where students can freely access diverse viewpoints—the plurality asserted that boards had to prove they were not removing books for biased political or social reasons. “Access to ideas . . . prepares students for active and effective participation in the pluralistic, often contentious society in which they will soon be adult members,” wrote Justice William Brennan in the principal opinion, and “the school library is the principal locus” of free inquiry for students. However, Brennan also wrote that school boards

possess significant discretion to determine the content of their school libraries, but that discretion may not be exercised in a narrowly partisan or political manner. Whether petitioners’ removal of books from the libraries denied respondents their First Amendment rights depends upon the motivation behind petitioners’ actions. Local school boards may not remove books from school libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to “prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.”<sup>15</sup>

School boards should retain authority to remove books they deem “pervasively vulgar” or lacking in “educational suitability,” the plurality said, but removals should not be partisan or political, or target a particular group. The plurality also stated that “nothing in our decision today affects in any way the discretion of a local school board to choose books to *add* [emphasis in the original] to the libraries of their schools. Because we are concerned in this case with the suppression of ideas, our holding today affects only the discretion to *remove* [emphasis in the original] books.”<sup>16</sup>

**“There is no agreement as to whether school boards or someone else should control what books are placed in libraries.”**

The ruling created a substantial gray area for districts, first and foremost because a plurality’s arguments are not typically considered binding; only the “narrowest grounds” that command assent of a majority of the justices bind future courts.<sup>17</sup> In *Island Trees*, only four justices endorsed a First Amendment right of access to information. Concurring justice Byron White established the narrowest grounds in agreeing that the motives of school board members mattered and their removal of books might have been unconstitutionally biased, but that meant only that the dispute should go to trial to determine the school board’s motives rather than the district receiving summary judgment in its favor, as the District Court had done and the Court of Appeals reversed.

Beyond the decision’s tenuous legal standing, placing the onus on a board’s motives requires legal decisions about something inherently difficult to pin down: what is in people’s minds. One person’s true motives are impossible to know for certain, and a school board is composed of multiple people, possibly with multiple motives. The plurality opinion also supported decisionmaking authority residing with a democratically elected body, allowing it to reflect “community values,” while simultaneously saying students should be able to access all ideas—a seemingly contradictory situation.

Finally, acquisitions are clearly implicated in the principle that public school libraries should be places in which

students are empowered to direct their own learning. Bias would have the same effect in book acquisition and book removal—not all sides would be equally represented. Indeed, bias in acquisitions might be worse, because decisions not to acquire books are by nature less visible than removing books already on shelves. Yet the plurality explicitly excluded acquisitions from its argument.

Principles enunciated by professional librarian organizations, and the operation of school districts, are also imprecise. There is no agreement as to whether school boards or someone else should control what books are placed in libraries, and while including diverse viewpoints is typically emphasized, the degree to which that includes diverse ideological perspectives as opposed to views from diverse demographic groups is unclear. In addition, many factors, including reviews from critics and age appropriateness, are often emphasized in selection guidelines.

Article II of the ALA’s “Library Bill of Rights,” which covers all libraries, not just those in public schools, states that libraries “should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.”<sup>18</sup> More specific to school libraries, the most recent ALA guidance is the 2018 update to the “Selection and Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, and Academic Libraries.”<sup>19</sup> It says that “strong policies state that the final responsibility for the selection decisions rests with the school library professional” but also that “the Board of Education or governing authority is legally responsible for the resources used in a school.”<sup>20</sup> The tension is clear: school boards, elected to represent the people of a district, have legal authority to control everything that happens in the district, yet librarians should be in charge of book acquisitions. The example of a good district policy in the toolkit is more complex, with the superintendent as intermediary:

The elected Board of Education shall delegate to the superintendent of schools or district administrator the authority and responsibility for selection of library materials in all formats. Responsibility for actual selection rests with professionally trained library personnel using the board’s adopted selection criteria and procedures.<sup>21</sup>

What standards should guide collections? The toolkit advises librarians to select material based on such criteria as meeting “high standards in literary, artistic, and aesthetic quality,” being “appropriate for the subject area and for the age, emotional development, ability level, learning styles, and social, emotional, and intellectual development of the students,” and receiving “favorable reviews in standard reviewing sources and/or favorable recommendations based on preview and examination of materials by professional personnel.”<sup>22</sup> The criteria also include diversity considerations, such as that acquisitions represent “differing viewpoints on controversial issues” and “materials by authors and illustrators of all cultures.” These provisions rely on the possibly subjective judgment of a librarian or reviewer to determine if a book is of high quality or appropriate for a particular age. However, the provisions call for ideological, not just group-identity, diversity in selection. This dual commitment—a diversity of ideas along with group identity—services “the right of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment.”

**“Much of the literature on diversity in libraries revolves around personal identities, such as the race or sexuality of authors and fictional characters.”**

The reality of how school libraries acquire books appears to vary significantly from district to district, though the matter does not seem to have been deeply studied. A 2021 analysis by April Dawkins and Emily Eidson in *School Library Research* reported only three previous empirical studies on school library selection policies. Of those three, only two were in the United States, both studied Texas, and one dealt with a single district. Dawkins and Eidson’s own study examined the acquisition policies of two school districts for each state: one in a large county, defined as having a population above 50,000, and one in a small county, with a population below 50,000. This resulted in 99 counties (Hawaii is a single district).<sup>23</sup>

Dawkins and Eidson found that 19 of the 99 districts had no acquisition policy, at least not one accessible through



an examination of district websites. Among policies the researchers could find, only 73 percent stated who was responsible for acquisitions, and among those, slightly more than half designated a library employee. The remainder identified the superintendent, the school board, or someone else.<sup>24</sup>

## “If school libraries are to be places in which exploration of diverse views occurs, intellectual diversity seems crucial.”

Guidelines for dealing with controversial books were also varied, with 39 percent of districts having statements about controversial content and 61 percent not. Some promoted selecting books with “diversity of appeal,” and one policy, not specifically about libraries, read, “Teachers may not use materials that are clearly controversial.” About 73 percent of districts had policies that encouraged embracing diverse perspectives, but with “inconsistent language” that “allows more room for subjective interpretation.”<sup>25</sup> A later study also found varied policies: *School Library Journal* reported in a 2022 survey of school librarians that 49 percent of libraries had some book-selection requirements while 51 percent had none.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the Supreme Court plurality view of public school libraries as places where students pursue diverse ideas for themselves, and ALA guidance that seems to encompass ideological diversity, much of the literature on diversity in libraries revolves around personal identities, such as the race or sexuality of authors and fictional characters. For example, as an article on the University of West Alabama website says, “Diversity encompasses several themes of identity, including race, ethnicity, disability, gender, class, religion, types of family and sexual orientation.”<sup>27</sup> Diversity of thought is not listed. Similarly, a 2020 article in *Knowledge Quest*, a journal published by the American Association of School Librarians (a division of the ALA), is focused entirely on personal identity.<sup>28</sup>

Such articles emphasize acquiring fiction, which perhaps does not lend itself well to viewpoint diversity, though novels like *1984* and *Atlas Shrugged* certainly have viewpoints. Acquisition guidance pieces also tend to focus on elementary-aged children, which might make surface

characteristics such as race and gender, rather than ideological views, more salient. But if school libraries are to be places in which exploration of diverse views occurs, intellectual diversity seems crucial.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given what may be at least a rough consensus on the mission of public school libraries—to serve democratically controlled districts while enabling students to access diverse viewpoints—three questions arise to determine how well public school libraries are functioning:

1. Can members of the public see which books are in school libraries?
2. Do school libraries have books that are potentially controversial?
3. Do school libraries balance perspectives?

The first question is important because democratically controlled schools are supposed to be “owned” by the public; to make informed decisions, voters need to be able to see what districts are doing. The second question matters because society needs to tackle contentious issues, and omitting controversial topics can inhibit students from undertaking the free inquiry that helps prepare them to do that. The third question is important because libraries can serve the purpose of free inquiry only if students can access competing ideas. Indeed, if only one side is represented, a library might be more a center for bias enforcement than for free inquiry.

## METHODOLOGY

Cato’s Center for Educational Freedom (CEF) staff randomly selected 200 traditional public school districts—no charter schools or specialty districts—from the 50 states and the District of Columbia to determine if schools serving middle and high school students, defined as grades 6 through 12, had access to libraries with catalogs searchable by members of the general public, and if they contained specific books representing contrasting viewpoints on the nature of American history and race. We searched for the following, in print, electronic, or audiobook form:

- Any of the five books in the Rush Revere historical fiction series by the late talk radio host Rush Limbaugh. The series is roughly geared to readers ages 6 through 12 and gives a conservative view of American history.
- Any of three books in the Stamped series by Ibram X. Kendi and various co-authors and adapters. The books discuss systemic racism and antiracism and are roughly targeted at different age groups.
  - *Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi; adapted by Sonja Cherry-Paul. Ages 6–8.
  - *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. Ages 12 and up.
  - *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi. Geared to adults.
- *Between the World and Me*, about author Ta-Nehisi Coates’s experiences with racism, presented as lessons to his son about coping in a country beset by systemic racism. Geared to adults.
- *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* by black professor John McWhorter, who argues that blaming African Americans’ problems on systemic racism is inaccurate, damaging, and treated like a religion—an unfalsifiable position. Geared to adults.
- *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay. Argues that “woke” analyses of social problems are anti-Enlightenment and threaten liberal democracy. Geared to adults.

Districts were randomly selected from the federal Common Core of Data.<sup>29</sup> CEF researchers visited the websites for selected districts, first looking for the ability to search middle school and high school library holdings. We focused on non-elementary schools because older children are presumably better able to understand more complex—and controversial—material. This strategy still pulled in several schools with elementary grades, because many districts have schools that encompass combinations of elementary, middle, and high school grades. When districts had multiple schools serving different ages, we chose one school for

middle and one for high school. A handful of districts had three qualifying schools, often with a K–6, a 7–8, and a 9–12 school. A few had just one qualifying school, serving grades 6–12. When districts had publicly searchable library holdings, we looked for the titles of interest. We contacted librarians and principals directly if we could not find a catalog to confirm that the schools did, in fact, have libraries.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 provides our primary results, including:

- Total number of libraries;
- Number of schools with access to libraries that could be searched by the public;
- Share of schools with access to searchable libraries carrying at least one of the target books;
- Number of schools with access to libraries that had each book; and
- Share of schools with access to libraries that had each book.

This report refers to the Stamped books and *Between the World and Me* as liberal and the Rush Revere books, *Woke Racism*, and *Cynical Theories* as conservative, for ease of discussing ideological balance, not because the authors would necessarily describe their views in those ways.

We report data largely based on counts of schools with access to libraries with specific characteristics, not districts, primarily because some schools share libraries, and it is the school that matters most for student library access (though final policy is often made at the district level). As shown in Table 1, we found 31 libraries sometimes shared by 2 schools in a district and occasionally by more than 2. The districts we searched had 377 libraries in total.

Of 408 schools, 348, or 85.3 percent, had access to libraries that we could search. Libraries could typically be searched either on a district website or through Destiny Discover, a product of the publishing company Follett that allows users to search for books, including print, electronic, and audio, available through the district. Sometimes Destiny Discover could be accessed through a district website, and sometimes users had to go to the Destiny Discover website and search for their school. Some districts used other

Table 1

**Totals and shares**

Districts	200
Schools	408
States	44
Schools with access to libraries	408
Shared libraries	31
Total libraries	377
Schools with access to searchable libraries	348
Share of schools with access to searchable libraries	85.3%
Share of schools with access to searchable libraries with at least one book	48.9%
Searchable schools with Rush Revere	35
Share with Rush Revere	10.1%
Searchable schools with <i>Stamped (For Kids)</i>	26
Share with <i>Stamped (For Kids)</i>	7.5%
Searchable schools with <i>Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You</i>	135
Share with <i>Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You</i>	38.8%
Searchable schools with <i>Stamped from the Beginning</i>	28
Share with <i>Stamped from the Beginning</i>	8.0%
Searchable schools with <i>Between the World and Me</i>	63
Share with <i>Between the World and Me</i>	18.1%
Searchable schools with <i>Woke Racism</i>	1
Share with <i>Woke Racism</i>	0.3%
Searchable schools with <i>Cynical Theories</i>	1
Share with <i>Cynical Theories</i>	0.3%

platforms, such as Fetch and Sora. It was sometimes difficult to discover how to search libraries, including finding access on district websites and determining if searches could be done through those websites or only by going directly to Destiny Discover. A few libraries had catalog portals that either required a login or were broken at the time we searched, which we counted as unsearchable.

Approximately 51 percent of schools with access to searchable libraries did not include any of the books on our list. This is seemingly at odds with the findings of Columbia University professor Kirsten Slungaard Mumma. In searching for books dealing with potentially controversial topics in thousands of public school libraries, she found that 78 percent of elementary/middle schools held at least 1 of 49 books dealing with LGBTQ+ topics, and about 97 percent of high schools held at least 1 of 100 books on that topic.<sup>30</sup> A similar share of high schools had at least 1 of

72 titles dealing with race or racism. Of course, Mumma's pool of books was much larger than ours and included fiction, greatly increasing the likelihood of finding a title.

As highlighted in Figure 1, among all libraries where any of the books for which we searched were found, there was a heavily pronounced liberal lean. Of conservative books (denoted by red bars), the most stocked were from among the five titles in the Rush Revere series, and only 35 libraries, or 10.1 percent of those searchable, had at least one. The newer, and more directly aimed at public policy, conservative books—*Cynical Theories* and *Woke Racism*—were found in one library each.

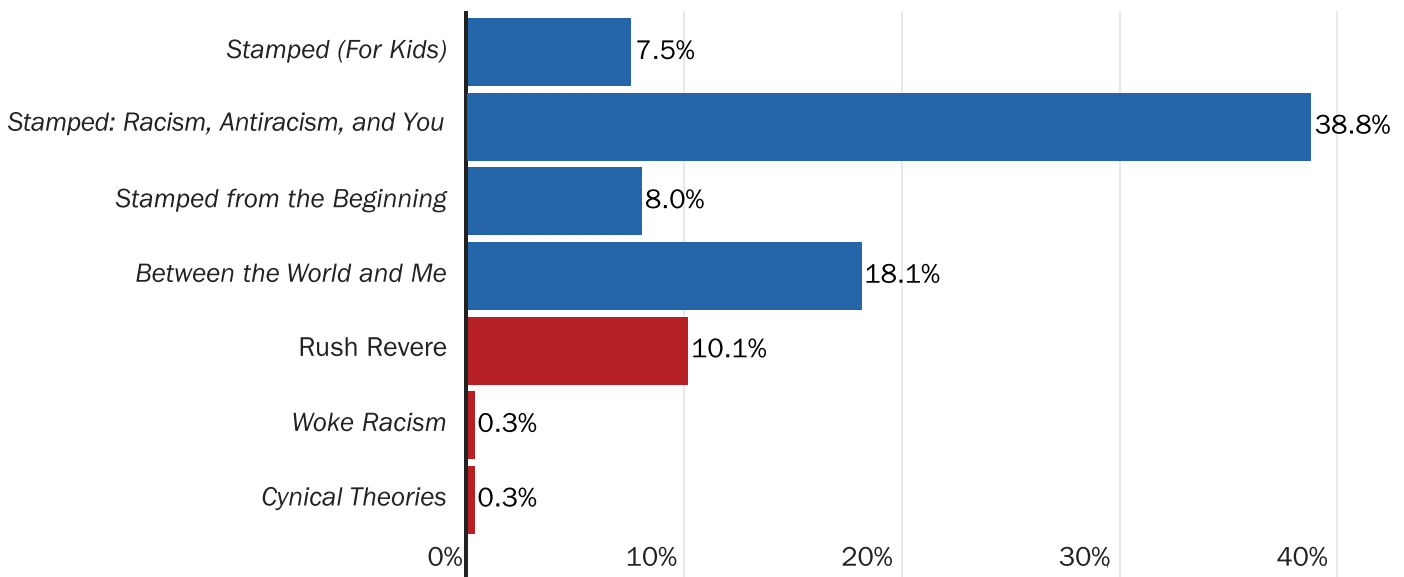
The least commonly accessible book among the *Stamped* series and *Between the World and Me* was *Stamped (For Kids)*, which was in 26 schools, or 7.5 percent of the total with access to searchable libraries. That was fewer than schools with access to at least one Rush Revere title. *Stamped from*



Figure 1

**Public school libraries that have selected books**

Share of searchable schools with book or series, percent



Sources: Books from Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom controversial book survey, 2023; schools selected by district from “2021–2022 District: Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, (v.1a),” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences.

*the Beginning* was on par with Rush Revere at 28 schools, or 8 percent of schools with searchable library access. *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* greatly outpaced all titles, being accessible in 135 schools, or 38.8 percent of all with searchable access. *Between the World and Me* was also much more commonly accessible than Rush Revere, in 63 schools, or 18.1 percent of all with searchable access. Meanwhile, *Cynical Theories* and *Woke Racism*—the latter largely a direct response to Kendi and Coates—were almost nowhere.

Given that the libraries we searched were much more likely to carry liberal perspectives than conservative, the number carrying a balance of views had to be small. This was confirmed when we looked directly at the number of libraries that had at least one liberal and one conservative book. We found that 21 schools had access to libraries stocking at least one of the liberal books and one of the conservative books, or just 6.0 percent of all schools with access to searchable libraries. We found 16, or 4.6 percent, had conservative books with no liberal balance, and 133, or 38.2 percent, had liberal books with no conservative balance. Figure 2 shows the number of schools with access to searchable libraries that had each title without an ideologically balancing book.

Liberal books were overwhelmingly stocked in libraries without ideological balance. Both *Woke Racism* and *Cynical*

*Theories*, in stark contrast, were found only in libraries with a balancing book. However, a Rush Revere title was accessible in 16 schools without a liberal balance. The latter suggests that some libraries had a conservative slant, which Mumma also found in searching for Christian fiction and Dr. Seuss books recently discontinued by the publisher for racially insensitive content.<sup>31</sup>

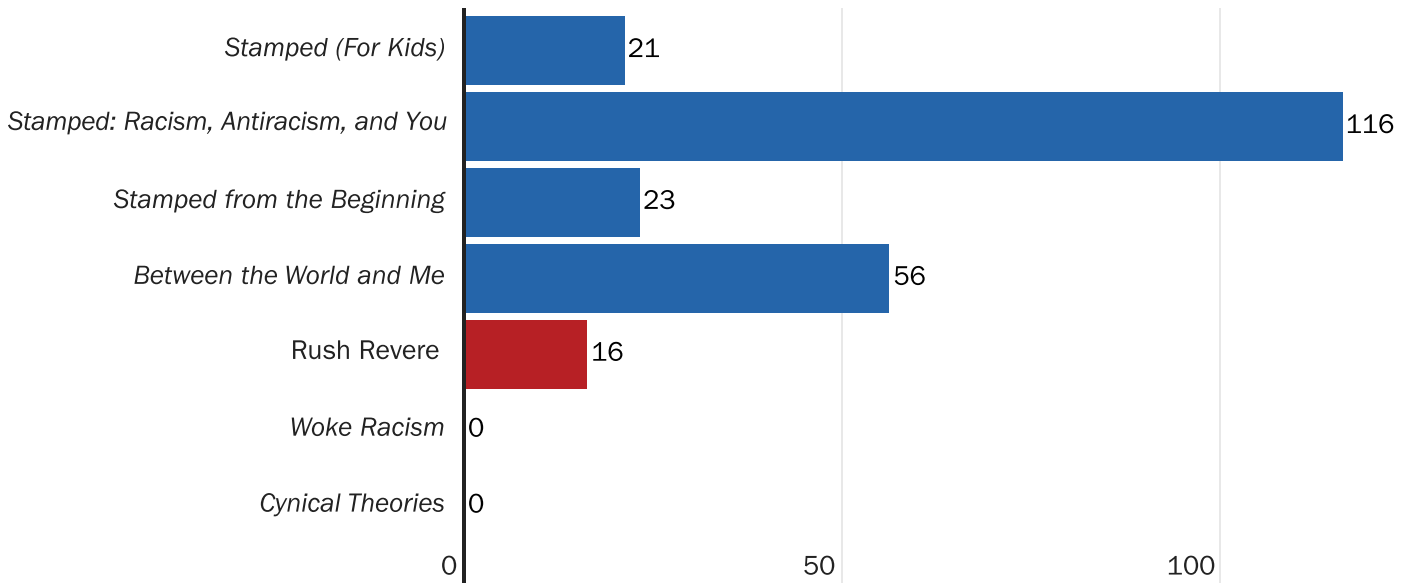
In addition to assessing total libraries searchable and books in those libraries, we broke libraries down by the grade spans served and whether a district was in a county that went strongly for Donald Trump, strongly for Joe Biden, or was a toss-up (defined as a 48–52 percent differential or smaller) in the 2020 presidential election.<sup>32</sup> For grade spans, we had 17 combinations with at least one searchable library, but to simplify, we classified any school serving grades in the 9–12 span as a high school and any without them as a middle school, noting that some overlapped, such as 7–12 schools, and some schools included elementary grades, defined as grades 5 and below.

Not unexpectedly, as shown in Figure 3, books geared toward younger readers tended to appear in libraries serving younger grades. For instance, 71 percent of schools with libraries that had a Rush Revere volume were middle schools. Similarly, nearly 60 percent with *Stamped (For Kids)* were middle schools. Still, nearly 30 percent of the schools with Rush

Figure 2

**Public school libraries that have a title without an ideological balance**

The number of schools with access to a book without access to a balancing title

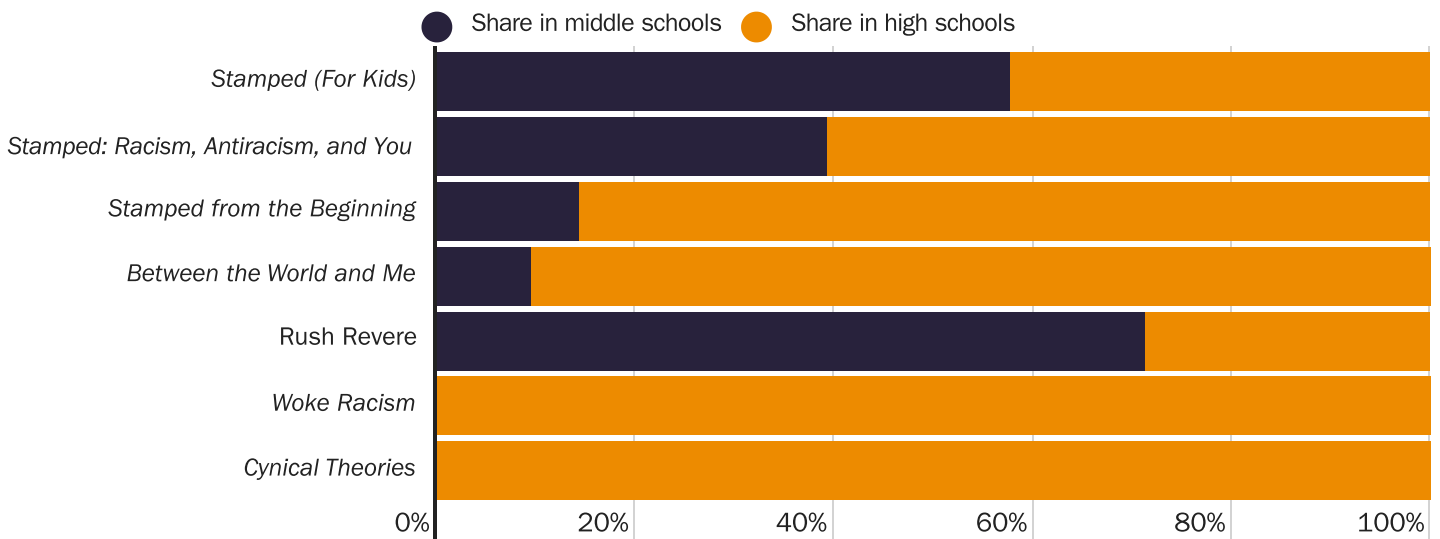


Sources: Books from Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom controversial book survey, 2023; schools selected by district from “2021–2022 District: Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, (v.1a),” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences.

Figure 3

**Share of controversial books in public middle and high school libraries**

Breakdown of schools that have book or series, percent

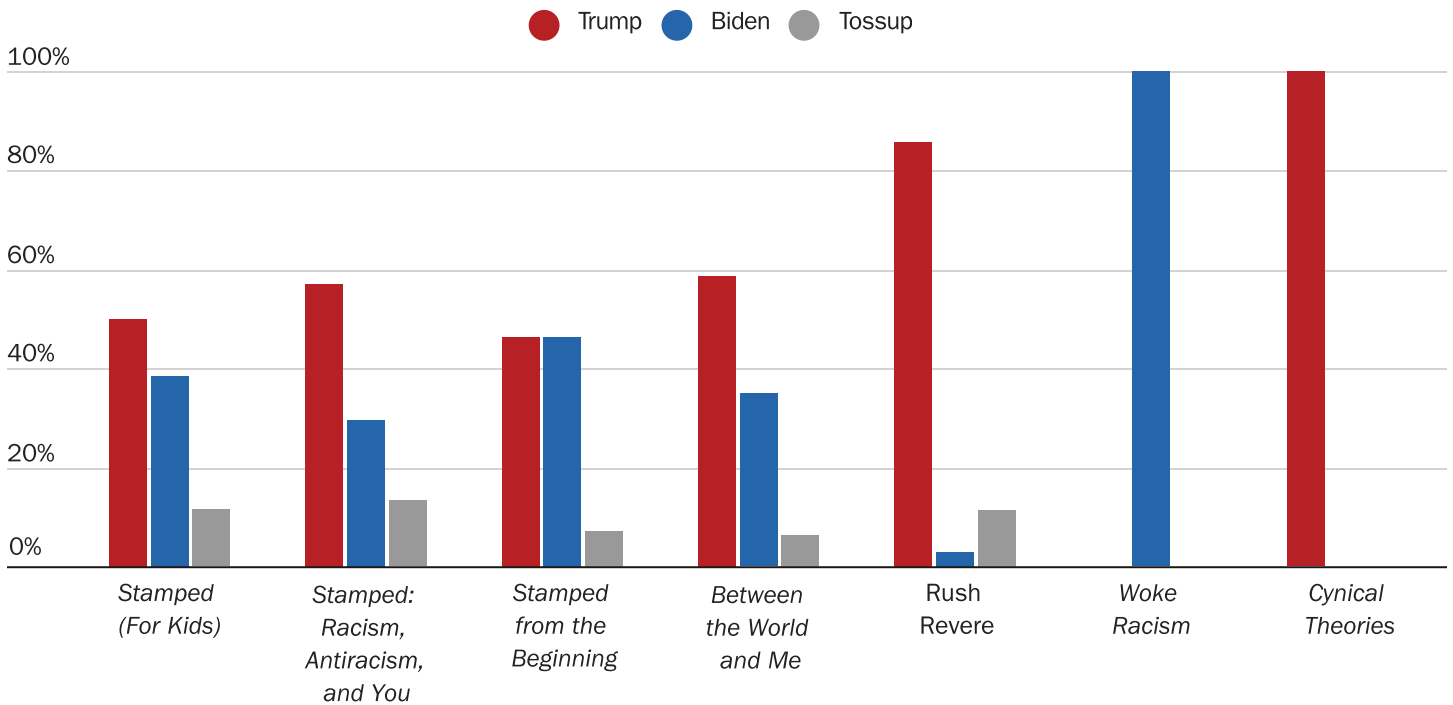


Sources: Books from Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom controversial book survey, 2023; schools selected by district from “2021–2022 District: Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, (v.1a),” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences.

Figure 4

**Share of each controversial book, by presidential election winner**

Of all copies found of each title, the percent in Trump-won, Biden-won, and tossup counties



Sources: Books from Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom controversial book survey, 2023; schools selected by district from “2021–2022 District: Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, (v.1a),” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences; voting data from America’s Choice 2020: Presidential Results, CNN.

Revere were high schools, as were nearly 40 percent with *Stamped (For Kids)*, which is targeted at elementary students. The other three liberal titles, and two conservative, were much more likely to be stocked in high schools than middle schools, consistent with their older target audiences.

The breakdown by voting was also roughly as one would expect, with conservative books more likely to be accessible in schools in counties that went for Trump in 2020 and liberal books in Biden counties.<sup>33</sup> In 2020, Trump won 2,497 counties to Biden’s 477, meaning Trump captured 84 percent of all counties and Biden 16 percent.<sup>34</sup> In our sample, 68.6 percent of counties are designated Trump victories, 23.0 percent Biden, and 8.3 percent tossups. As seen in Figure 4, the breakdown of Rush Revere titles is as expected: much more likely to be in schools in Trump-won counties than Biden-won. It is also as expected that the liberal volumes are disproportionately in schools in Biden counties, which account for 16 percent of all counties but between 30 and 50 percent of the liberal book holdings. Perhaps more striking is that in many cases an equal or higher percentage of all holdings of liberal books are in schools in Trump

counties. Of course, there are far more such counties.

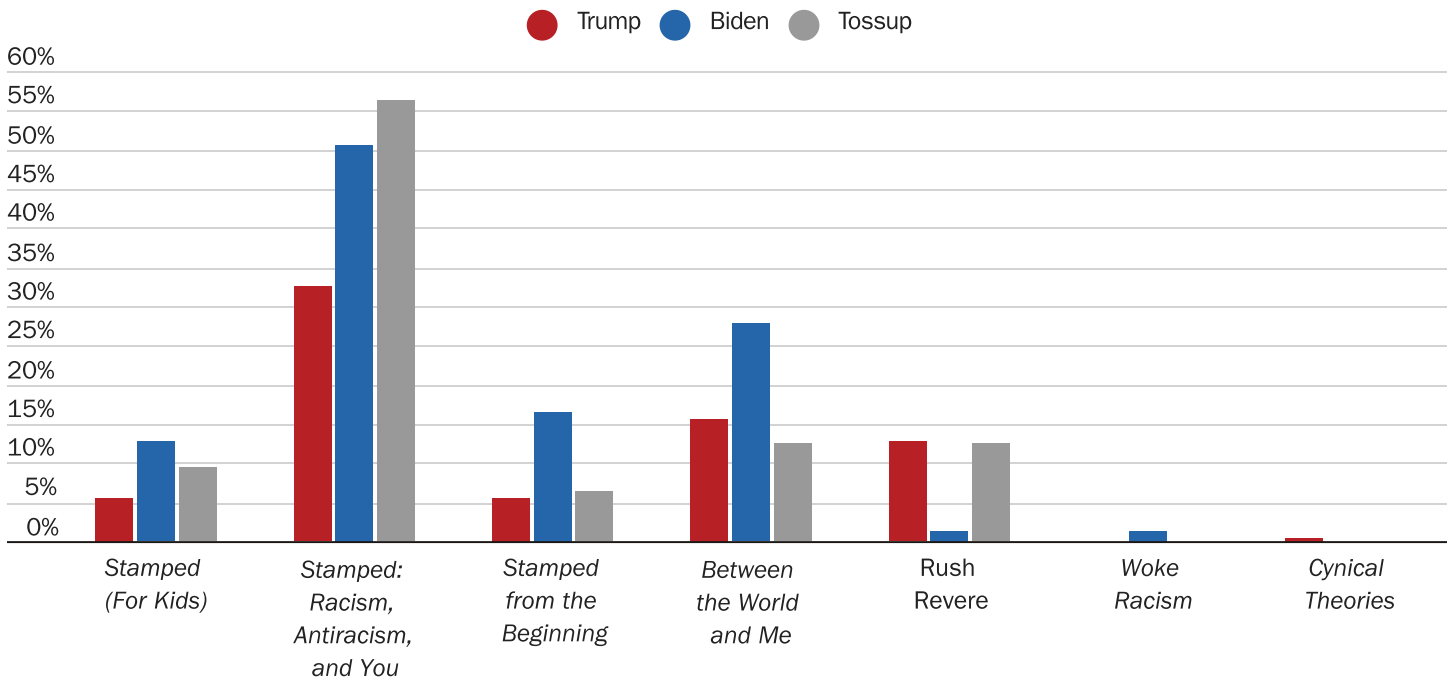
Looking at the distribution from the perspective of how the counties voted and the percentage of schools with a particular title (Figure 5), liberal titles are more likely to be in liberal districts, and conservative titles in conservative districts. For instance, 50.6 percent of schools with searchable libraries in Biden-won counties carried *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, versus 32.5 percent in Trump-won counties.

Perhaps more interesting than the liberal/conservative breakdown is that tossup districts were almost equally likely to stock at least one book from the Rush Revere series as schools in Trump counties, and more likely to carry *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* than schools in Trump and Biden counties. One might expect such schools to be less likely to carry controversial books because residents of those districts would be more closely divided ideologically, and facing a greater chance of painful conflict, than other districts. Also striking is that school libraries in Trump-won counties were more likely to carry *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* and *Between the World and Me* than Rush Revere or the other conservative books.

Figure 5

**Share of schools with each title, by presidential election winner**

Of all schools in Trump-won, Biden-won, and tossup counties, percent with each title



Sources: Books from Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom controversial book survey, 2023; schools selected by district from “2021–2022 District: Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, (v.1a),” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences; voting data from America’s Choice 2020: Presidential Results, CNN.

Finally, we can see the share of districts by presidential vote not stocking any of the books. As seen in Figure 6, of schools with access to searchable libraries, 55.7 percent in Trump counties, 45.6 percent in Biden counties, and 31.3 percent in tossups carried none of our target books. Again, tossup counties are surprising.

**DISCUSSION**

We return to our three questions:

- Could members of the public search middle and high school library catalogs online?
  - Typically yes, though sometimes with a fair amount of difficulty in determining how.
- Did libraries have potentially controversial books?
  - Typically no, though almost half of schools with a searchable library had at least one of the titles, and we searched for only a handful of books.
- Did libraries balance perspectives in their holdings?
  - Rarely. Libraries overall that had at least one of the titles were far more likely to have liberal than

conservative books, necessarily leaving liberal titles largely unbalanced, at least by the books for which we searched. Twenty-one schools, or 6.0 percent of those with access to searchable libraries, had access to libraries with balance, versus 149, or 43.8 percent, without balance. Sixteen schools, or 4.6 percent, were unbalanced conservative, and 133, or 38.2 percent, were unbalanced liberal.

**Why No Books?**

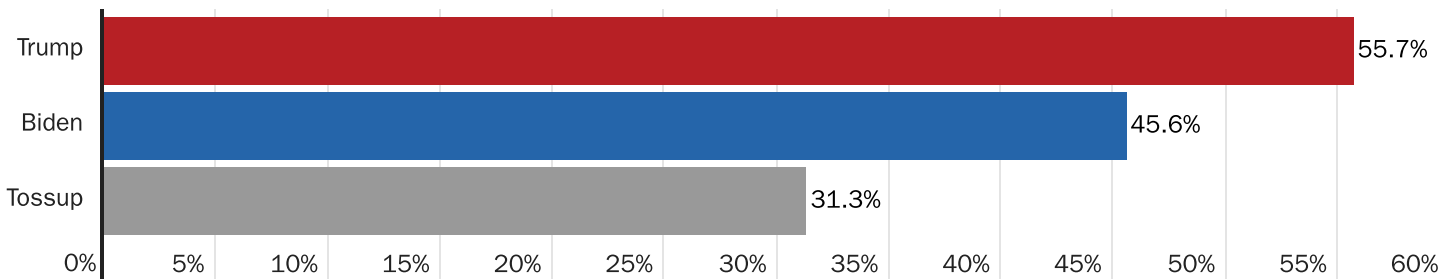
The finding likely to be of the most interest to the public and policymakers is the yawning gap between liberal and conservative titles stocked by public school libraries. Before delving into that, however, it is important to consider why more than half of schools with searchable libraries have none of the titles for which we looked.

Contemplating why librarians who might have considered any or all of the titles for which we searched did not stock them, the most likely explanation is controversy avoidance: school boards, district authorities, or librarians—whoever is in charge of selecting and approving book

Figure 6

### Share of schools with no controversial titles, by presidential election winner

Schools in Trump-won counties less likely to have any selected controversial books than in Biden-won or tossup counties



Sources: Books from Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom controversial book survey, 2023; schools selected by district from “2021–2022 District: Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, (v.1a),” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences; voting data from America’s Choice 2020: Presidential Results, CNN.

acquisitions—might have chosen maintaining peace for themselves and people within the district over addressing controversial topics. Surveys of school librarians support this. Thirty-three percent of respondents in a 2022 *School Library Journal* poll reported that “possible reaction from parents” caused them to not purchase a book, and 22 percent reported worries about “possible reaction from administrators/school board” and “from the community.”<sup>35</sup> A 2016 *School Library Journal* survey had similar findings, with “possible reaction from parents” coming in second behind “non-age appropriate content” as reasons to not purchase books.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to an expectation of conflict avoidance, as seen in Figure 5, we found that schools in tossup counties were more likely than in Biden-won counties to have access to searchable libraries with *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, and almost equally likely as schools in Trump-won counties to be able to access a Rush Revere title. In other words, those books were more likely to be in tossup counties than counties aligned with their politics. Also, as seen in Figure 6, libraries in tossup counties were less likely to have none of the books than in either Biden- or Trump-won counties. Assuming that closely divided populations would be especially likely to want to avoid controversy, this is a surprising finding. However, it might be that tossup counties have ideological splits among people who get along despite them.

The other major explanation for our finding so many schools with libraries not stocking our titles of interest almost certainly is our design: we have a very narrow selection of books. Not only is the pool of titles small—11, including all the Rush Revere titles—they are primarily nonfiction.

Much of the focus of school libraries, including controversies, is on fiction, so a small number of largely nonfiction books is likely to miss potentially controversial titles that libraries stock, as captured by Mumma. And middle schools, which constitute slightly more than half (51.2 percent) of our schools, might eschew many controversial books because they are geared at too high a reading level.

### Bias in Acquisitions?

Among libraries that stocked the titles of interest, why was there a huge imbalance between conservative and liberal books? The most intuitive explanation might be that librarians, or other district employees responsible for book acquisitions, are biased toward liberal and against conservative viewpoints. This is an explanation that would likely jibe with the suspicions of many conservatives, but there are other possible explanations that need to be considered, including that the conservative books are not as popular, or as well targeted to schools, as the liberal offerings; that the conservative books are not targeted to middle- and high-school-aged readers to the same extent as liberal volumes; or that the quality of conservative books is not as high as that of liberal ones.

### Popularity and Targeting

To assess the possibility that liberal titles are more popular than conservative ones, we can look at Amazon sales ranks, though it is important to note that older books



Table 2

**Sales ranks**

Title	Year published	Amazon rank
<i>Between the World and Me</i>	2016	3,600
<i>Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You</i>	2020	5,740
<i>Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody</i>	2020	12,403
<i>Stamped (For Kids)</i>	2021	20,543
<i>Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America</i>	2021	29,908
<i>Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims</i>	2013	37,962
<i>Rush Revere and the Star-Spangled Banner</i>	2015	52,447
<i>Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America</i>	2016	56,105
<i>Rush Revere and the Presidency</i>	2016	62,739
<i>Rush Revere and the First Patriots</i>	2014	63,107
<i>Rush Revere and the American Revolution</i>	2014	192,427

Source: Amazon.com, hardcover sales ranks, May 3, 2023.

are likely to have lower ranks but more years to have been acquired (Table 2), which makes this an imperfect means to examine popularity as a driver of acquisition. Those variables might roughly balance out the likelihood of a lower-ranked book being part of a library collection, assuming that the current sales ranks are not different by large magnitudes.

The two liberal books that were the most prevalent have the highest sales ranks, so popularity almost certainly explains some of the imbalance. But probably not all of it: *Cynical Theories* comes in third but was available in only one searchable school, while lower-ranked *Stamped (For Kids)* was available in 26. *Cynical Theories* was also published about nine months before *Stamped (For Kids)*, giving librarians more time to stock it. In addition, both *Cynical Theories* and *Woke Racism* were ranked higher than *Stamped from the Beginning*, but the latter was available in far more schools: 28 versus one each. That said, *Stamped from the Beginning* was published a few years before *Cynical Theories* and *Woke Racism*, so it has had more time to get into libraries. All the Rush Revere books were in the lower half of sales but were also, with one exception, published before any of the other titles, likely putting the Rush Revere books roughly on par with others for one-time popularity that might have resulted in their acquisition. Indeed, in 2014 Limbaugh won Author of the Year at the Children’s Choice Book Awards for *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims* based on top sales and

children’s votes.<sup>37</sup> We also looked for all five Rush Revere books, compared to specific liberal titles, which should have increased the likelihood of finding one.

It is possible that the authors of the conservative books are not as well known as the liberal authors, decreasing conservative books’ relative popularity. Ibram X. Kendi has certainly been high profile over the last several years, and Jason Reynolds, his co-author on the most frequently stocked *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* as well as *Stamped (For Kids)*, was the Library of Congress’s National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature from 2020 to 2022.<sup>38</sup> But all the authors have a fairly high profile, and the lowest sales number—192,427—is for a book by Rush Limbaugh, arguably the most famous name in talk radio, who at the time of his death in 2021 had an estimated 15 million weekly listeners.<sup>39</sup> For perspective, Amazon book rankings go well into the millions, so these titles are all in upper sales strata. Finally, all the books, either alone or as collections, were *New York Times* bestsellers, save for *Cynical Theories*, and it had the third-highest Amazon rank among these titles and was a bestseller on lists such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.

More easily examined than popularity is targeting. First and foremost, publisher Hachette entered into a partnership with OverDrive Education in January 2021 to distribute digital and audio copies of *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*,

Table 3

**Target age groups**

Book	Age group
<i>Stamped (For Kids)</i>	8–12
<i>Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You</i>	12–18
<i>Stamped from the Beginning</i>	Adult
<i>Between the World and Me</i>	Adult
Rush Revere series	8–12
<i>Woke Racism</i>	Adult
<i>Cynical Theories</i>	Adult

Sources: Publisher product pages.

along with several other books, for free to school libraries.<sup>40</sup> We could not find evidence of an equivalent undertaking for any of the conservative books we tracked, though at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic Limbaugh announced that families could request free copies of his books while supplies lasted. It is possible schools might have taken advantage of that, though the focus was on families educating at home during pandemic lockdowns.<sup>41</sup>

On the publisher websites for the books we included, none of the conservative titles have content directed at educators. The page for *Cynical Theories* is quite plain, relatively speaking, presenting only the cover, some basic information such as a synopsis and ISBN, and endorsement quotes.<sup>42</sup> The pages for the various Rush Revere titles are more colorful and engaging than for *Cynical Theories*, but the closest they come to appealing specifically to educators is publishing the books' reading level under the Lexile Framework for Reading, a tool commonly used by educators.<sup>43</sup> *Woke Racism's* page also consists of just basic information.<sup>44</sup> *Stamped from the Beginning's* publisher page is similarly plain but includes a reading-group guide, albeit one not explicitly geared toward educators. The *Stamped (For Kids)* page is pretty basic.<sup>45</sup> *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, in contrast, includes a free downloadable guide for educators, while the page for *Between the World and Me* features both a reading-group guide and a "teacher's guide," the latter aligned to Common Core standards.<sup>46</sup>

While the Rush Revere publisher page does not have study guides or auxiliary content that might push library or school engagement, Limbaugh's own website does. It offers study guides for all five titles and a specific "Teaching Guide" for *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims*. It

also provides word searches and other activities.<sup>47</sup> There are even Rush and Kathryn Adams Limbaugh Family Foundation scholarships available for students ages 4 to 15 who submit three-minute-or-less videos about their "favorite character, place, or historical event featured in the Rush Revere Time Traveling Series."<sup>48</sup>

**Target Ages**

In addition to a greater likelihood of being marketed to educators than the conservative titles, the liberal books tend to be more geared toward school-aged readers. As Table 3 shows, two of the *Stamped* books are aimed at children, with *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* including both middle and high school ages. Only the Rush Revere series among the conservative books is aimed at school-aged readers.

Among the books with similar age targets, the Rush Revere series and *Stamped (For Kids)*, Rush Revere is available in more schools—35 to 26—although there are several more titles available for Rush Revere. Limbaugh also notes in several places on the series website, including the scholarship page, that the books are suitable for readers both younger and older than the 8-to-12 age range, and students up to age 15 are eligible to win. *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* does not have an age analog among the conservative books against which to compare it, with an age range that is essentially both middle and high school. That likely has a significant impact on its wide availability. On the flip side, *Between the World and Me* is not classified, at least on the publisher's website, as being for children, but it is held in 63 schools. Nor is *Stamped from the Beginning* classified as a children's book, but it is available in 28 schools.

Meanwhile, the conservative books for adults are accessible in only one school each.

That liberal books not geared toward school-aged readers are much more likely to be in school libraries than conservative volumes suggests that recommended age range is not the full explanation for why liberal titles so outnumber conservative ones. However, that *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* is accessible in twice as many schools as any other title is almost certainly at least partially driven by its being targeted to a wide swath of school-aged readers. That the Rush Revere series is also geared toward school-aged readers—though not as broadly as *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*—likely explains its relatively far reach. And while *Stamped from the Beginning* is for adults, it was published before *Cynical Theories* and *Woke Racism* and has had more time to be stocked.

**“A seemingly obvious reason that conservative books might not be stocked as often as liberal ones is that they are of lesser intellectual or literary quality. The problem is that what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is subjective.”**

Importantly, age ranges are just suggestions, and people can purchase books for readers who fall outside of those ranges. Also, kids of the same age often read at quite different levels. Even adult books can cover wide variation in reading difficulty. For instance, *Woke Racism* is a slim volume of just 201 pages, including endnotes, an index, and peripheral matter, with around 364 words per page.<sup>49</sup> *Stamped from the Beginning* is 590 pages, including notes, an index, a reading guide, and other peripheral matter, with around 385 words per page. The latter is clearly a more substantial reading commitment than the former. On the other hand, while *Between the World and Me* was published for an adult audience, it is constructed as advice from a father to a son, which certainly seems to gear it at least somewhat toward high school readers. Indeed, it won a 2016 American Library Association Alex Award, recognizing “books written for adults that have special appeal to young adults, ages 12

through 18.”<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, *Cynical Theories* gets deeply into sophisticated—and sometimes intentionally inscrutable, according to the authors—philosophical and sociological writings that might be beyond what almost any high schooler is likely to understand.

## **Quality**

A seemingly obvious reason that conservative books might not be stocked as often as liberal ones is that they are of lesser intellectual or literary quality. A poorly written, poorly argued book is presumably less worthy of taking up finite shelf space than a well-written book with rigorously reasoned arguments. The problem is that what constitutes “good” or “bad” is subjective and is especially likely to vary from person to person when it comes to books on controversial political and social topics.

Librarians are encouraged by the ALA to consult various review journals, such as *Kirkus Reviews*, *Booklist*, and, especially for school librarians, *School Library Journal*, to help judge what should go into their collections. Examining those sources, we found that our liberal titles of interest were more likely to have been reviewed and, when reviewed, to have received positive responses. When we examined *Booklist*—a publication of the ALA—reviews were available for all the Stamped books and *Between the World and Me*, and all appeared to be positive. From the Rush Revere series, only *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims* was reviewed, and that review was negative. Neither *Woke Racism* nor *Cynical Theories* had been reviewed. When we searched *Kirkus*, two of the Rush Revere books—*Rush Revere and the First Patriots* and *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims*—had reviews; both books were panned. *Kirkus* had no review of *Cynical Theories* but reviewed *Woke Racism* positively. All the liberal books had reviews, and all were glowing. Finally, *School Library Journal* had positive reviews of *Stamped (For Kids)*, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, and *Between the World and Me*, but no reviews of the conservative books.

It may well be that our targeted conservative books are wanting as literature, history, or both. But the greater tendency to review the liberal books suggests that the basic viewpoint of reviewers might skew more liberal. This is supported in looking at the *Kirkus* and *Booklist* websites. In its website’s About section, *Kirkus* indicates that it holds a liberal view of

diversity, spending much of the section explaining its inclusivity thrust. It notes that reviewers focus on “race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, sexuality, gender, disability, or more.”<sup>51</sup> At best, intellectual diversity falls under “more.” *Booklist’s* Frequently Asked Questions section does not mention anything about a specific diversity focus.<sup>52</sup> Finally, we could not find a statement about diversity and book selections for *School Library Journal*, but the Diversity heading on its website featured stories that appeared to be centered on group identity such as ethnicity, disability, and religion.<sup>53</sup> The diversity policy listed on the website concerned events, not book evaluations, but still suggested a focus on group identity, saying, “Our goal is to create an inclusive, respectful environment that invites participation from people of all races, ethnicities, genders, ages, abilities, religions, and sexual orientation.”<sup>54</sup> No mention of ideological or political viewpoints.

## **Bias**

A final possible explanation for the imbalance between liberal and conservative viewpoints is that librarians as a profession have a pronounced leftward bias. As librarian Will Manley wrote in *American Libraries* in 2010:

My experience is that the library profession is not just overwhelmingly liberal but vocally so in supporting various political issues. Despite our core value of intellectual freedom, librarians are not very tolerant of listening to points of view that stray from the basic liberal agenda. That is why conservative librarians are afraid to speak out: They fear professional ostracism.<sup>55</sup>

Manley continued, citing Limbaugh specifically:

When was the last time that a big name conservative thinker or politician was invited to speak at a high-profile library conference? Why is it that the Al Gores of the world are always invited to ALA conferences but not the Rush Limbaughs or Sarah Palins? Is it because librarians would rather be validated in their viewpoints than challenged?<sup>56</sup>

In a study of conservative academic librarians, academic librarian Kaetrena Davis Kendrick and professor Ione T.

Damasco review the left-leaning political positions taken by the ALA concerning both libraries and issues beyond them, such as health care and foreign policy.<sup>57</sup> They also cite various arguments against political neutrality in the profession, though those seem largely to be against professional associations such as the ALA remaining neutral, as opposed to eschewing neutrality in collections. Finally, based on a purposive sample of conservative librarians in collegiate libraries, Kendrick and Damasco report that conservative librarians often feel a need to stay “in the closet” lest they be ostracized. This was somewhat mitigated when librarians worked at religious colleges. Some of the conservative librarians also reported observing liberal bias in library operations, including collection development.<sup>58</sup>

**“A 2023 analysis of partisan political contributions found that 91 percent of library directors gave to Democrats, versus 9 percent to Republicans, and 88 percent of library technicians gave to Democrats, versus 12 percent to Republicans.”**

This is not comprehensive information—that librarians lean heavily to the left seems to be more something that “everyone knows” than something that has been systematically demonstrated. As Kendrick and Damasco write, “Very little formal scholarship exists surrounding the concept of conservative (or conversely, liberal) identities within librarianship.”<sup>59</sup> The closest that research seems to come to establishing bias on a broad basis are analyses of librarians’ political donations. Supporting the assumption of liberal bias, a 2023 analysis of partisan political contributions found that 91 percent of library directors gave to Democrats, versus 9 percent to Republicans, and 88 percent of library technicians gave to Democrats, versus 12 percent to Republicans.<sup>60</sup> Of course, political donations are not a full picture of how librarians lean politically, capturing only the most politically active ones. Donations also do not establish that, even if librarians are overwhelmingly left-leaning, their political proclivities affect their book-acquisition decisions.

That said, a sizable bias among librarians would be consistent with bias in acquisitions and other information we have about the profession.

## What Is Happening?

It seems likely that all the possible explanations play a role in the sizable leftward imbalance we found, and bias among librarians or other people making acquisition decisions is one of them. First and foremost, the dominance of *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* is likely a product of its being popular, geared to the age groups we targeted, heavily promoted to schools by the publisher, and liberal. The next most readily available book, *Between the World and Me*, though not specifically targeted to middle- and high-school-aged students, is in the form of a father's guidance to a son and conveys a liberal message. It is also the second-most popular title overall.

That books in the Rush Revere series are the third-most readily available, though pulling up the bottom on Amazon sales rankings, might also testify to the importance of books being targeted to school-aged readers and supplemented with reading and teaching guides. That said, the fact that the Rush Revere books are found almost entirely in schools in counties that voted for Trump suggests that there is bias at work—a conservative bias in conservative districts and a left-leaning bias in liberal districts. In contrast, the fact that many schools in Trump counties had access to liberal titles, including 74 schools in Trump counties that did not have access to conservative titles, suggests that liberal book purchasers often transcend their counties' conservative politics, while conservative views rarely surmount liberal politics.

The possibility of such an overall liberal bias is buttressed by *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims* being ignored or panned by book review sites commonly used by librarians yet winning an award based on its popularity. A possible liberal tilt in conservative districts is also consistent with data from Mumma, who found that elementary and middle school libraries in districts she identified as most conservative carried on average more books with LGBTQ+ themes than Christian fiction, with 3.1 of the former compared to 1.6 of the latter.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the result most indicative of a liberal bias is that 28 times as many schools had access to *Stamped from the Beginning*—a very long book for adults—as had *Woke Racism*. The latter was appreciably more popular on Amazon,

though also newer and much shorter, which suggests it would be more digestible for younger readers. *Woke Racism* also has no school-aged substitutes, whereas *Stamped from the Beginning* has been adapted for numerous age groups. Finally, *Woke Racism* was reviewed favorably by *Kirkus*, which the ALA encourages librarians to consult, but was still not widely acquired.

**“The result most indicative of a liberal bias is that 28 times as many schools had access to *Stamped from the Beginning*—a very long book for adults—as had *Woke Racism*.”**

The overall evidence strongly suggests that there is a liberal bias among librarians themselves and the resources on which they tend to draw to evaluate and select books. But liberal bias is likely not the only explanation for the pronounced liberal lean we find. While Limbaugh appears to have done much to promote his books, including specifically for educational purposes, his publisher appears to have done little. There appears to have been no concerted effort to promote *Woke Racism* and *Cynical Theories* to middle and high schools. Meanwhile, Kendi and his collaborators appear to be engaged in an intensive effort to get the ideas in the *Stamped* books in front of school-aged children, including with a newly released graphic novel adaptation intended for readers of all ages.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, *Between the World and Me*, while ostensibly written for adults, has a guide specifically for teachers. Conservatives appear to not tend to market their work to schools and school-aged readers as readily as liberals.

## Should Popularity or Reviews Even Matter?

Crucially, if the mission of public school libraries is to provide diverse viewpoints, there is a good argument that popularity and reviews should be largely irrelevant. Librarians should be actively seeking counterpoint opinions, lest they systematically marginalize minority views. They should not be expected to unearth very obscure books, of course, but none of the titles we searched for, all of which have high Amazon sales and significant public



recognition, fit that description. Related to that, librarians should not put all their stock in reviews of books to assess quality. It appears that many of the sources of these reviews might be biased, both in choosing which books to review and in the reviews themselves. And if librarians tend to be overwhelmingly liberal, it is quite possible that how they view the quality of books will have an implicit bias against conservative viewpoints.

## A WAY FORWARD

The purpose of this study is to assess how public school libraries are functioning. Can they be searched by the public? Do they have books that tackle controversial issues? And do they offer ideologically diverse viewpoints? The purpose is not to provide detailed policy prescriptions. As a result, we present just some basic thoughts.

The first problem for public policy is that it is not clear whether public libraries should reflect the values of the communities they serve or be places where all ideas—even those anathema to the majority of a citizenry—can be found. The *Island Trees* case left that a gray area, particularly over what constitutes political and social bias versus excluding “pervasively vulgar” content. The graphic novel *Gender Queer*—arguably the biggest flashpoint in the current public schooling culture war—is perhaps case in point, with those calling for its removal citing what they see as vulgar and offensive content, and its supporters characterizing efforts to remove it as bias against LGBTQ+ people.

In addition to the ambiguity surrounding *why* a book should be removed from a library, which should also logically apply to the reasons for acquisition, is ambiguity about *who* should decide what is stocked. Is it school boards, which ostensibly represent the people in a democratically controlled system, that should make final decisions? Or should they cede that power to superintendents or, most directly, librarians?

Public schooling, some people believe, is supposed to be almost an ideal example of democracy at work.<sup>63</sup> Public schools are supposed to be run by democratically elected representatives who debate policies among themselves, deliberate in front of and with community members, and enact the will of the majority. In this conceptualization, the school board, as representatives of the people, should

ultimately decide which books are in schools and which are not.

Of course, this is problematic for a community’s political minority, which can also be a racial, religious, or ideological minority. Members of the minority can be forced to pay for books or instruction that they find offensive or prejudiced, arguably denying them equal treatment under the law. The Supreme Court has tried to tiptoe around this by distinguishing library options from course content—school boards can exert more control over the latter than the former—coming close to conferring a special First Amendment status on libraries. But no matter libraries’ legal status, the reality is inescapable: unless they stock *all* books ever published, or randomly select books, someone must make judgments about which books make the cut and which do not. Libraries cannot stock every viewpoint.

**“The reality is inescapable: unless libraries stock *all* books ever published, or randomly select books, someone must make judgments about which books make the cut and which do not.”**

Given the inescapable need to select among books for inclusion and exclusion, and the basic purpose of democratic governance to reflect the governed, school boards—not librarians or other school employees—should probably have the final say in what books are in public school libraries. Selection should be done in an open, transparent process that could call on all members of the community to nominate books for purchase and delegate the assessment of potential purchases to librarians or superintendents, with the school board voting on the final inclusions. This could be accomplished by first widely publicizing the list of candidate books and then providing opportunities for both written and spoken feedback from the community, including filing of specific objections. Ultimately, though, the school board should vote on a final list. Such public acquisition would be consistent with deliberative democratic control. Otherwise, public school libraries would be subject to rule by supposed experts, which is anathema to both democracy and liberty.

That said, such a process would, as mentioned, leave minorities in an untenable position, potentially forcing them to pay taxes to purchase books they find objectionable, maybe even hostile. But how can you satisfy both the political majority and minority, especially over a book such as *Gender Queer*, which some people find completely unacceptable?

**“Private institutions can pursue the ideal with an important escape valve for pressure to not stock books some find objectionable: those who object are welcome to leave and can take their education money with them.”**

What about just making sure libraries are inclusive of all opinions? That seems easier said than done. For one thing, if public school libraries adhered to much current guidance, that would already be the case. Our findings suggest it is not. More concretely, human beings, even when we strive to act in an objective and fair manner, are ruled by our emotions and biases more than our reason.<sup>64</sup> That makes the likelihood of bias skewing library holdings high, even if neutrality is the official touchstone. It is also difficult to tell communities that “these schools belong to you, but we will fill them with books you don’t like,” both because community members reasonably feel they own public schools for which they must pay taxes, and because you cannot wish away angry responses that can cow school board members or librarians into not adopting controversial titles.

This might point to school choice, such as education savings accounts or scholarship tax-credit programs, as a necessary reform. Bias in public school libraries is not a primary reason school choice might be the best way to deliver education in a free, diverse society—the curriculum has a much greater impact—but if bias is inevitable in library collections, it also points toward attaching funding to students and letting families choose among diverse institutions. If school libraries will have a bias, it is more consistent with liberty and a free marketplace of ideas to let diverse families freely choose education they think is right than to have government

impose one bias on all. Of course, some people will choose schools with particular viewpoints that are reflected in their libraries, but their children will still live in a society that has public expression of many perspectives that children can see and eventually evaluate. Also, private schools can fully strive to have, and parents can demand, libraries stocking diverse perspectives—there is no reason the ideals of inclusivity must go away. Indeed, private institutions can pursue the ideal with an important escape valve for pressure to not stock books some find objectionable: those who object are welcome to leave and can take their education money with them.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study used small samples of libraries and books, with a 200-district sample and only a handful of purposively selected books. Two hundred randomly selected traditional school districts out of approximately 13,500 is not tiny, yielding a  $\pm 7$  percentage point margin of error, but a larger sample would produce more nationally representative results. (408 schools out of about 79,600 would yield a  $\pm 5$  percentage point margin of error.) More important than the sample size of districts and schools, a larger sample of books spanning more publication years, topics, and recommended age groups would provide a richer picture of school library inventories and allow greater assessment of the factors behind some books’ presence and absence. We might have simply missed conservative books on race and the character of America that were more widely held—our study is aimed at beginning to assess our three main questions, especially involving balance, relatively quickly and on a national basis.

One especially important limitation of this study is that it focuses on nonfiction books (though Rush Revere would likely fall under historical fiction), and much of the national debate on school library holdings, as well as guidance on acquisitions, is about fiction. To find books that represent different ideological perspectives would require a much broader knowledge of fiction, especially for children, than CEF researchers have. Mumma—whose important study was released after we had begun our exploration—looked intensively at children’s literature, providing important insights.

Finally, the primary purpose of this study is not to prove *why* public school libraries eschew controversial books or

have an ideological imbalance. Inspired by the newfound prominence of public school libraries in the national political debate, the study's purpose is to determine *if* they have that imbalance and begin to explore some possible reasons for it. More comprehensive analyses of acquisition policies and possible bias among librarians are called for, especially given the paucity of research on the latter. As our findings suggest, there are likely major factors at play in addition to, or instead of, ideological bias that explain why public schools acquire the books that they do.

## CONCLUSION

Public school libraries have come under intense scrutiny over the past couple of years as Americans have hotly debated what books are appropriate for children. But how those libraries should function, and what is actually in them, has

## NOTES

1. For a much larger analysis of public school library holdings and possible factors driving them, see Kirsten Slungaard Mumma, "Politics and Children's Books: Evidence from School Library Collections," Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University EdWorkingPaper no. 22-693, February 2023.

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not been well studied. Our probing of public school libraries suggests that members of the public can see most library book options—though not always with great ease—but that many school libraries may not include books on controversial topics. Most strikingly, when controversial books are part of library collections, our findings suggest there might be a strong slant in favor of liberal viewpoints. This imbalance is likely a function of many possible variables, including the books' popularity, audience targeting, and purchaser bias.

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