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## EDUCATION

# Demand is high from Michigan teachers for more window, mirror books: What they are



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When everyone in her house is tucked into bed and nearly ready for sleep, Kelly Baptist powers on a speaker sitting in her home's hallway and turns on an audiobook.

Quietly, Baptist and her family listen as the story echoes through her home.

For Baptist, who teaches for a living, and for many others, books unite families and communities.

But in 2022, books also divide communities. Across the country, school districts are banning books from libraries and scrapping texts deemed controversial from curricula. In Tennessee, a school board recently voted to ban "Maus," a graphic novel about the Holocaust, citing language and nudity.

**More:** We asked Michigan teachers what books they're assigning in class

Baptist thinks reading is different now than when she was a kid. Children have more distractions. Achieving focus seems harder. But the moments her family listens together in the quiet of the night forge connections from literature to real life — a connection she has always found so valuable.

Baptist is the author of a children's book, "Isaiah Dunn is My Hero" and an educator in Benton Harbor Schools who lives in Berrien Springs. Sacred to her as a kid growing up in Michigan were Mildred D. Taylor's books, especially Taylor's series following the Logan family in rural Mississippi during the Jim Crow era.

"I think that struggle did unite that family in a very unique way," Baptist said. "They had to depend on each other; they had to depend on their community. And I really connect with

those themes of family and community.”

Today, some school boards are considering bans on certain books. In Michigan, parents in a few small communities have challenged books including “The Bluest Eye,” a novel by Toni Morrison, and others that feature LGBTQ+ characters. Some of these fights aren't new — “The Bluest Eye” has been the subject of battles for years.

Renewed battles illustrate simmering mistrust of what teachers introduce to students. These fights have been contentious.

But they miss the larger trend in classrooms: Educators are adding more diverse texts into their curricula and approaching older, long relied-on titles through a new lens.

**More:** Books are being banned from school libraries. Here's what that does to students.

The world is evolving, and so is the literature students are exposed to in the classroom.

In an effort to spotlight books students read today in class, the Detroit Free Press asked teachers across the state what titles they love sharing with students and why. Find their answers here.

Educators, administrators, authors and policymakers say the work to diversify their curricula is challenging but rewarding. Sometimes these changes have entailed having difficult, nuanced conversations about the words authors use and the plots they employ.

“Books were my opportunity to visit many, many spaces and places around the world outside of Detroit,” said Corinne Edwards, an assistant director at the Michigan Department of Education. “We're just encouraged by the fact that teachers are engaging in conversation with each other, lifting up resources that they have found to be successful and helping them to open up the eyes of young people.”

## **Windows and mirrors**

To Maryna Hedeem, books connect children to their own lives.

Hedeem's students are largely immigrants. She teaches English Learner students at Brownstown Middle School in the Woodhaven-Brownstown School District. Some of her students are very recent immigrants to the United States, including one from Pakistan who moved in September to Michigan.

Hedeen came from Ukraine to America in her 20s, more than a decade ago. Being an immigrant is sometimes lonely. And she knows from her own experience, that books can show students new to the country that they aren't alone.

"It's important because they do not feel like they're the only people in the world," she said. "Because, hey, there's some other immigrant kids and they have adventures similar to mine or different from mine. ... It helps you understand that there are many more people like you."

Hedeen has read and collected stacks of children's books. She wants to make books available to her students that will link them to their culture — and she wants to read books, too, that help her understand her students better.

"It was very intentional: I needed to find the books that would be relatable to our students," she said.

Hedeen also hopes her collection of books will serve as windows for students who aren't immigrants. She recently recruited 15 student volunteers from the middle school to read a new stack of books, many about the experiences of immigrants, and share their thoughts.

The books include "Front Desk" by Kelly Yang, about a family from China managing a motel near Disneyland in California, and "Power Forward" by Hena Khan, about a fourth grader who must hide from his family his dreams of being the first Pakistani American basketball player in the NBA.

As they consider new books to introduce in the classroom, teachers are searching for windows and mirrors, a phrase English teachers have popularized in recent years.

"Window" books transport children to an unfamiliar world. Readers are exposed to new ideas, new perspectives and new places.

"Mirror" books reflect a reader's life. And because the world contains such a range of experiences and identities, educators say it's important to include books that reflect a diversity of people and circumstances.

Black students may see themselves reflected in Black protagonists. Children in foster homes may see themselves reflected in books featuring characters who grew up in foster homes.

Kia Jane Richmond, director of the English Education department at Northern Michigan University, said students who see themselves reflected in literature can often become students who are engaged with literature.

“I’ve had a couple of students who are Native American and they said, ‘When we read “Firekeeper’s Daughter” or another text that features Native characters, for the first time I’m seeing myself in a book,’ ” she said.

Requests for window and mirror book recommendations are growing among English teachers in Michigan, said Katy Piotrowski, a literacy consultant for the state Department of Education.

“We know it’s a need,” she said.

The demand has been so high, the department has convened a four-part virtual conference series aimed at English teachers. On a Thursday evening in January, educators spent two hours listening to experts recommend new approaches for classroom discussions around literature.

## **Historical context**

To Jean Alicia Elster, books offer important perspectives on history.

The children’s book author, who lives in Detroit, has penned multiple stories structured around historical eras: Her 2013 book, “The Colored Car,” follows Patsy, a 12-year-old in Detroit during the Great Depression who is shocked when her family is directed to a segregated train car for Black riders. Another book meant for children, “Who’s Jim Hines?” tells another complex story of racism in the 1930s.

Elster, who is Black, drew inspiration from her own family’s history. Her grandfather was an entrepreneur in Detroit during the Great Depression, and lived in one of the few unsegregated neighborhoods in the city at the time, she said.

Young people are contemplating heavy issues like racism, she said, and exposing them to accurate and sometimes painful, fictionalized accounts of history contextualizes the racism still facing young people of color today.

“America is a grand experiment,” she said. “And for the most part it has done well. But we have to keep our fingers on that core of humanity. ... And so that’s why I write these books.”

But some books portraying parts of history in a dark and complicated light are under fire in book-banning battles across America. Elster believes these battles often miss the point of introducing young people to literature.

“We can ban all the books they want,” she said. “But young people are going to be thinking about these things. And it behooves us to help them.”

In Tennessee, a county school board unanimously voted to ban “Maus,” a graphic novel about the Holocaust, from its curriculum. Board members said they objected to “rough” language and a nude drawing of a woman in the novel.

On Twitter, the U.S. Holocaust museum decried the decision, writing that novels like Maus “can inspire students to think critically about the past.”

Educators from across Michigan, however, repeatedly answered that they believe in assigning books to students that address painful moments from history, some that include light profanity or the N-word.

Jenny Nate, an English teacher at Niles High School in west Michigan wrote that she assigns “To Kill A Mockingbird” because discussions around the novel turn into respectful forums where students share their own divergent perspectives on everything from family struggles to coming-of-age confusion and prejudice.

“Novel discussions generated by the themes and plot in this book give us a safe platform in our classroom to discuss challenges from that time period that we all still face today,” Nate wrote.

State Sen. Stephanie Chang, D-Detroit, is among the state lawmakers sponsoring a package of bills requiring schools to include Arab American, Asian American, African American, Native American, Latin American, Chaldean American and Caribbean American history in their curricula.

Chang said she has heard a lot in particular from Asian parents asking why students learn so little about Asian American history in school. Those parents have told her they value honesty in history lessons, even when that honesty reveals uncomfortable truths about American history.

“They understand the need to make sure that we're teaching the real truth and the whole truth to our students because that's what they deserve,” she said.

The bills, introduced in May 2021, have not advanced in the Republican-controlled Legislature. Republicans instead are spearheading legislation demanding more transparency from schools about what students do all day in school.

House Bill 5722 would require schools to publicly post curricula, books, writing assignments and extracurricular activities by the first day of school every year. The bill, introduced this month, has been referred to the House Education Committee for consideration.

Gary Eisen, R-St. Clair Township, said at a House Education Committee hearing Tuesday that posting curricula before the beginning of the school year could help schools better communicate with parents.

"To me this is the perfect opportunity for schools and parents to work together," he said. "Instead of creating this perception of, 'What are you trying to hide?' "

Such information would likely show the variation in school reading assignments from district to district, because individual districts and educators work out the texts they assign in class.

This effort, along with the push to ban critical race theory in the classroom, underpins the rise of skepticism over what students are taught. Teachers repeatedly have been accused of "indoctrinating" students through discussion around race, religion and sex.

According to Richmond, who teaches future English teachers, that's not how it works in the classroom. Instead, educators are opening up conversations among young people so political and ideological divides don't feel so vast.

"I'm not proselytizing," she said. "I'm not asking them to vote in a certain way or to change their religion or change their perspective. I'm asking them to consider all perspectives and to think about why we might go to one instead of the other as an automatic, and if that is because that's all we've known, then, that's very limiting."

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