



CHILDREN EDUCATION GOVERNMENT JUSTICE MILITARY

Book purges at Fort Campbell, other schools run by Defense Department challenged as unconstitutional

BY: SARAH LADD - APRIL 15, 2025 6:15 PM



📺 The First Amendment rights of students at Department of Defense schools are being violated by removal of library books about Black history, alleges the American Civil Liberties Union in a lawsuit against Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and others. (Getty Images)

Kentucky students are part of a federal lawsuit challenging U.S. Department of Defense policies that led to [schools at Fort Campbell and other military bases removing books about slavery and civil rights](#).

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is one of the defendants as lawyers ask the court to block Trump administration executive orders related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

Filed in the United States District Court for Eastern Virginia Tuesday, the suit slams “system-wide censorship” that the plaintiffs say violates students’ First Amendment right to receive information.

American Civil Liberties Union chapters in Kentucky and Virginia are joining the national ACLU in filing the suit on behalf of 12 students from six families.

Students in fourth grade, kindergarten and pre-kindergarten at Fort Campbell’s Barsanti Elementary School are among the plaintiffs. Other plaintiffs are enrolled in schools in Virginia, Italy and Japan. They are among more than 67,000 students enrolled worldwide in schools run by the [Department of Defense Education Activity](#).

Via executive order Trump directed schools receiving federal funding to [not teach](#) “ideology that treats individuals as members of



📷 Celebrating International Day in 2017, kindergarteners at Barasanti Elementary School at Fort Campbell donned a handmade Chinese dragon they had made to wear in a fashion show. (Photo by Mari-Alice Jasper/Fort Campbell Public Affairs Office)

preferred or disfavored groups, rather than as individuals;” he also told the [Armed Forces to dissolve DEI offices](#) and directed all federal agencies to [recognize only cisgender male and female identities](#).

In February, [Clarksville Now](#), a news outlet in Clarksville, Tennessee, reported Fort Campbell librarians were busy “scrubbing for books that contain references to slavery, the civil rights movement and anything else related to diversity, equity and inclusion” in compliance with Trump’s orders.

Fort Campbell is an Army base that spans the Kentucky-Tennessee border between Hopkinsville and Clarksville.

Fort Campbell schools also had to remove “bulletin boards that reference Black History Month and Black leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks,” according to [Clarksville Now](#).

The ACLU lawsuit says Trump’s orders “*“* censor references to slavery, civil rights, race, ethnicity, immigration, diversity, sexual orientation and gender identity.”

“While the government has broad discretion to populate public school libraries and create curricula, the First Amendment imposes guardrails to ensure *removals* are justified,” the brief says. “Public

school districts cannot suppress educationally valuable books and materials about race and gender in public schools simply because a new presidential administration finds certain viewpoints on those topics to be politically incorrect.”

Corey Shapiro, legal director for the ACLU of Kentucky, said in a statement that students “have a right to receive an education that includes an open and honest dialogue about America’s history.”

“Censoring books and canceling assignments about the contributions of Black Americans is not only wrong, but antithetical to our First Amendment rights,” Shapiro said.

Being part of a military family does not erase students’ constitutional rights, said Emerson Sykes, a senior staff attorney with the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project, in a Tuesday statement. Sykes said that Defense Department schools “are some of the most diverse and high achieving in the nation, making it particularly insulting to strip their shelves of diverse books and erase women, LGBTQ people, and people of color from the curriculum to serve a political goal. Our clients deserve better, and the First Amendment demands it.”

The ACLU says the Department of Defense has prohibited cultural awareness months – including Black History Month, Pride Month, Women’s History Month and National Hispanic Heritage Month – and that books reportedly removed include “The Kite Runner” by Khaled Hosseini and “Hillbilly Elegy” by Vice President J.D. Vance, as well as a preparation guide for the Advanced Placement psychology exam.

Michael O’Day, a spokesperson for the Department of Defense Education Activity, said he couldn’t comment on the active lawsuit.

“However, The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) is unwavering in its dedication to providing an exceptional educational experience for every student. Our curriculum, rigorously aligned with DoDEA’s proven standards, has earned us the distinction of being the top-ranked school system in the United States for four consecutive years, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation’s Report Card,” O’Day said in a statement. “These standards promote academic excellence, critical thinking, and a learning environment that empowers all military-connected students to excel.”

The nation’s military academies also are under pressure from Hegseth’s office to eliminate DEI, prompting the [Naval Academy to remove almost 400 books](#) from its libraries. The New York Times [reports](#) that Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” a memoir of growing up Black in America, was removed while two copies of Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” remain on the shelves in Annapolis.

[Read the lawsuit filed against U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and others](#)

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF VIRGINIA
ALEXANDRIA DIVISION**

E.K. and S.K., minors, by and through their parent and next friend LINDSEY KEELEY; O.H., S.H., and H.H., minors, by and through their parent and next friend, JESSICA HENNINGER; E.G., a minor, by and through his parent and next friend MEGAN JEBELES; E.Y. and C.Y. minors, by and through their parent and next friend ANNA YOUNG; L.K., L.K., and L.K., minors, by and through their parent and next friend ANNA KENKEL; and M.T., a minor, by and through her parent NATALIE TOLLEY,

Plaintiffs,

v.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE EDUCATION ACTIVITY; DR. BETH SCHIAVINO-NARVAEZ, in her official capacity as Director of the Department of Defense Education Activity; and PETER BRIAN HEGSETH, in his official capacity as Secretary of Defense,

Defendants.

Case No.

**COMPLAINT FOR DECLARATORY AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF
INTRODUCTION**

1. The Department of Defense Education Activity (“DoDEA”) is quarantining lib books and whitewashing curricula in its civilian schools. Right now, DoDEA is scrubl references to race and gender from its libraries and lessons with no regard to how canonical, aw winning, or age-appropriate the material might be.

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SARAH LADD

Sarah Ladd is a Louisville-based journalist from West Kentucky who's covered everything from crime to higher education. She spent nearly two years on the metro breaking news desk at The Courier Journal. In 2020, she started reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic and has covered health ever since. As the Kentucky Lantern's health reporter, she focuses on mental health, LGBTQ+ issues, maternal health, children's welfare and more.

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