



EdWorkingPaper No. 24-1064

I know my rights? Iowa Senate File 496, book bans, and the First and Fourteenth Amendments

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This instrumental case study explores 31 Iowan educators' and board of education members' perceptions of the ways the state's book ban law, Senate File 496 influenced school information systems. Mathisen's (2015) informational justice conceptual framework guided data analysis. The three key findings of this study were Senate File 496 was imprudently discriminatory in implementation, invalidated recognition of school community identities, and threatened democratic participation in information systems.

VERSION: October 2024

Suggested citation: Watson, Kathryn. (2024). I know my rights? Iowa Senate File 496, book bans, and the First and Fourteenth Amendments. (EdWorkingPaper: 24-1064). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/ndz9-e414>

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Abstract

This instrumental case study explores 31 Iowan educators' and board of education members' perceptions of the ways the state's book ban law, Senate File 496 influenced school information systems. Mathisen's (2015) informational justice conceptual framework guided data analysis. The three key findings of this study were Senate File 496 was imprudently discriminatory in implementation, invalidated recognition of school community identities, and threatened democratic participation in information systems.

Keywords: Senate File 496, K-12 education policy, book bans, public school, information systems

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The development of informed citizenry is a bedrock tenant of the foundation of the United States public school system (Grimes, 2022; Mann, 1839; Stitzlein, 2017). This belief is grounded in the notion that informed citizens are better equipped to participate in democratic governments. Thus, a key part of public education is citizenship transmission, where students learn ideals, values, and systems in the United States and are equipped with the ability to critically think and balance multiple perspectives (Grimes, 2022). Public schools are largely responsible for teaching information literacy by helping students learn where to access information, how to evaluate the validity of a source, and ways to interrogate conflicting viewpoints. This can be done through school curriculum, such as Civics classes, lessons teaching about acceptance and inclusion, and by having books and other resources reflecting diverse experiences and values (Grimes, 2022). These lessons and books provide students with the ability to examine different norms, values, and beliefs, as well as explore alternative methods of coping or responding to different situations (Grimes, 2022). Moreover, for underrepresented students, these resources provide students with a chance to see themselves in the literature and reduce a student's feelings of being an outsider. These resources can help students explore themselves and the way they see themselves in the world.

Nevertheless, not all books or resources are intended to be read by every student. Parents have the right to let schools know what texts their child is not allowed to read, and schools must respect this request (Rehn, 2023). However, in the past few years, there has been a dramatic rise

of state-wide book bans across the United States (Langrock et al., 2023; Rehn, 2023; Zhang, 2022). These bans largely target texts written by or represented peoples of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) folks. These types of legislation are often ways for politicians to gain political clout, however, they have real implications for the students and communities influenced by the legislation. Recently, Iowa passed Senate File 496, banning nearly 500 books across the state (A bill for an act related to children and students § Senate File 496 [Senate File 496], 2023). This inquiry's purpose is to better understand how this legislation influenced school information systems using Mathisen's (2015) informational justice conceptual framework.

Literature Review

Teacher Librarian Responsibilities

Teacher librarians play an important role in schools. In schools, they are viewed as teachers first and librarians second as they have a duty to assist in educating every student in the school body (Lupton, 2016). According to the American Library Association (2017), librarians are responsible for literacy advocacy, information literacy, coordinating with other professionals, designing instructional materials, leveraging appropriate pedagogy, teaching information literacy, and collaborating with teachers across the school. While many people often think librarians are responsible for curating books, their primary role in schools is to help with literacy instruction and collaborate with teachers to help leverage literacy and information censoring skills (Reed, 2018). This includes vetting sources and learning to sort through mis and dis information. Teacher librarians are held to professional guidelines and standards set by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) (2024). These standards include inquiry,

building new knowledge and problem solving, include others through a commitment to inclusivity and diversity, collaborate with others to broaden perspectives, curate meaningful resources for personal relevance, explore through innovating growth mindsets, and engage in legal, safe, and ethical sharing of public products (AASL, 2024). Moreover, they follow guidelines from a variety of AASL and writing organizations that vet resources in deciding what to incorporate into their school (Reed, 2018; Zhang, 2022).

Book Bans Around the Nation

Since 2021, there has been a dramatic increase in the rate of book banning across the nation (Langrock et al., 2023; Rehn, 2023; Zhang, 2022). Legislation banning books disproportionately target texts written by people of color and/or feature LGBTQ+ characters; yet, around 25% of youth identify as LGBTQ+ (Center for Disease Control, 2024). Also, in 2021, 45% of K-12 students identified as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Often, these types of legislation are viewed as efforts to influence voters and political ideologies and act as ways to further political agendas (Dunn, 2022; Langrock et al., 2023; Zhang, 2022). Nevertheless, supporters argue book bans protect parental rights and prevent students from being exposed to over-sexualized content (Zhang, 2022). However, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) mandates schools inform parents of their rights to opt out of certain lessons and units (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Meanwhile, Civil rights groups and free speech experts argue these laws instead seek to marginalize already oppressed peoples and Kline et al. (2022) notes these types of laws are correlated with increases in interpersonal violence. For example, 41% of books removed from schools include LGBTQ+ tags yet they comprise only

3.1% of young adult literature (Zhang, 2022). The states with book bans include Florida, Texas, Missouri, Utah, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and now Iowa (Meehan et al., 2023).

Book Bans and the Law

While many argue that book bans protect parental rights, it is important legislation upholds the rights of students and are measured against the Constitution, not parental rights (Rehn, 2023) as age is not a legal ground for discrimination (Rosky, 2022). Typically, books are screened for appropriateness by publishing houses and scholarly or professional journals rate books that librarians use to ensure they do not violate any obscenity laws and that they are appropriate for the school. Additionally, questionable books are often placed under the *Pico* test (*Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v Pico* [*Pico*], 1982), which states removing books cannot violate First Amendment and the removal of books is prevented if the removal is because people disagree with the ideas in the text. It goes on to say schools cannot aim to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalities, religion, and other matters as students have the right to receive information and ideas (Schroeder, 2021). However, this ruling is largely unclear and can be challenging to apply (Kim, 2022). The *Pico* test is cited by proponents of book bans arguing education suitability (Rehn; 2023; Schroeder, 2021). Due to this ambiguity, and the ease in which school boards can manipulate *Pico* standards, Schroeder (2021) suggests schools use the *Tinker* test (*Tinker v Des Moines School District*, 1968) for books instead, which would protect First Amendment free speech (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I, 1791) as long as it was not substantially disrupting the school environment. Indeed, access to information is essential to developing an informed citizenry and functioning democracy, and public schools are where a majority of youth grow skills for

effective citizenship (Grimes, 2022; Rosky, 2022; Schroeder, 2021). Moreover, the American Civil Liberties Union (2024) argues that removal of texts focusing on LGBTQ+ identities is a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment as it actively discriminates against a group of peoples (U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIV, 1868).

Senate File 496

In May 2023, Iowa passed Senate File 496. This legislation requires schools to remove any texts that depict or discuss sex acts, prevents discussion and instruction around gender identity and sexual orientation before 7th grade, requires parent permission for mental health surveys and for any students that wish to use a nick name (Senate File, 2023). Educators found to be in violation of the legislation risk losing their job and/or license. What is more, the state did not provide any directions regarding what texts were and were not appropriate (Discher, 2023; Waggmeester, 2023). Those who support the legislation champion the law as a parental rights bill that prevents against “woke indoctrination” and grooming of students to become LGBTQ+ (Nguyen, 2023). Critics of the legislation claim it violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments and actively marginalizes LGBTQ+ students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). It is important to note that in Iowa, the state allocates nearly \$130 million annually to private schools and provides public vouchers so that families can send their child to a private school if they wish (Rushing, 2024).

At the time of writing there were two court cases underway against Senate File 496. One lawsuit brought about by students argues that the banning of discussing gender identity and sexual orientation violates the First Amendment freedom of speech, and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Becker 2023). The second case brought about by Penguin

Random House, a major United States publishing house, and a collection of authors and educators argues the book ban, which removed nearly 500 books across the state violates the First Amendment and the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment as it targets a specific group of people (Becker, 2023; Connor, 2023; Nguyen, 2023; Smart & Elasser, 2023). In December 2023 a federal judge placed a temporary injunction on Senate File 496's book ban and banning of gender identity discussion saying it was far too overbroad to be applied correctly (Connor, 2023). The state responded by appealing the injunction in January 2024 (Higgins, 2024).

Nevertheless, the roll out of Senate File 496 reflects the adoption of "Don't Say Gay" legislation in a largely rural midwestern state and immediately impacted schools through the removal of texts and altering of information in schools, especially considering Marraccini et al.'s (2022) notion that inclusive schools increase school climate for all students. Thus, the purpose of this inquiry is to get a better understanding of how educators and school board members think Senate File 496 influenced school information systems.

Research Questions

The research question that guided this inquiry was;

1. How do Iowa educators and school board of education members perceive how Senate File 496 influenced school information systems?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to guide this study was Mathiesen's (2015) informational justice framework. In this framework, Mathiesen (2015) expands on traditional components of social justice in library informational sciences. Mathiesen identifies socially just library systems as ones that do not take political viewpoints, ensuring they serve, believing an informed citizenry is better than an uninformed one. Thus, libraries have a duty to give voice to the exclusion and marginalization of underserved populations. When library information systems are socially just, they consider how institutions shape communities and have ethics of care and respect for individual human beings and the communities involved. In this regard, libraries promote social justice by creating and supporting diversity of information, providing information resources for social justice, treating people as seekers, subjects, and sources of information, and using voices and resources of library professionals and organizations to promote diversity (Mathisen, 2015).

Mathisen (2015) expands on the social justice foundations for library science in the establishment of informational justice. Informational justice systems include three components. They are (1) iDistributive justice, where people are viewed as information seekers, (2) iParticipatory justice, which refers to the sources available and, (3) iRecognitional justice, or the subject of those sources. The "i" before the names is intended to reflect democratic participation in library informational systems. Through the informational justice framework, Mathisen (2015) argues iDistributive justice is when information goods and services are equitably distributed amongst members of society. When done correctly, iDistributive justice creates environments that welcome all people and provide information to demystify stereotypes. It also considers access to information is an issue of equity, thus access to information is a resource, not necessarily the information itself. Meanwhile, iParticipatory justice speaks to when all members

of society have opportunities to share their viewpoint. In this regard, informational justice provides opportunities for marginalized groups to express themselves and provides them with a voice in developing the information reflected in the library system. Finally, iRecognitional justice contends available information should include fair and accurate representation of all members of society. Within this framework, libraries are inclusive to all, culturally competent, and avoid resources that perpetuate stereotypes (Mathisen, 2015). Indeed, a central pillar to this framework is the need to consider social injustices imbedded within larger institutional systems and cultural bias.

The researcher selected this conceptual framework to examine ways Senate File 496 influenced school library systems because it highlights the importance of reflecting all community members' experiences and perspectives in library collections. Additionally, informational justice speaks to the power of information systems in validating or perpetuating oppressive systems and stereotypes (Mathisen, 2015). Thus, this conceptual framework helps to focus on ways Senate File 496 and districts broad interpretations of the legislation speaks to LGBTQ+ individuals.

Methods

Research Design

This research study employed an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to examine ways Iowan educators and school board members perceive Senate File 496 influenced school information systems. According to Stake (1995) instrumental case studies are useful in highlighting the unique nuances of a topic within a broader context that may seem insignificant

to outsiders. In this study, the instrumental case study provided the researcher an opportunity to elicit more elaborate responses from participants to understand the ornate ways Senate File 496 influenced school information systems.

Participants

Thirty-one educators and school board of education members across the state of Iowa participated in this study. They represent a wide variety of positions such as leadership, classroom teachers across grade levels, and school counselors. The researcher randomly recruited participants across the state via publicly available emails and were provided a \$15 e-gift card to participate. The researcher recruited across 136 counties at random across the state. The participants range from one to 33 years in education and represent rural, urban, and suburban communities across the state. See Table 1. The researcher identified the school setting using the National Center for Education Statistics (2024). All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity. Some educators held multiple responsibilities, however in efforts to protect their identity, only their main role is reported in the study. The 31 educators are a subset of 35 total participants. Four participant voices are not reflected in this study as they did not discuss the book ban or curriculum restrictions in any way, though this does not mean their districts were not influenced by the legislation.

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews after obtaining institutional review board permission and sending participants informed consent and the studies exempt status. These documents provided an overview of the study, interview procedures, and

efforts taken to protect participant privacy and confidentiality. The researcher used semi-structured interviews, which allow for additional probing and clarification outside the set script of the interview. All interviews took place on zoom and averaged 45 minutes in length. The researcher conducted interviews between December 2023 and April 2024. Interview questions asked about participant perceptions and experiences regarding Senate File 496. Sample interview questions include;

1. Please describe your familiarity with File 496, the legislation that bans school from formally surveying students about their mental health, bans discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation before 7th grade, and bans any books that depict or describe sexual activities from schools.
2. How has this legislation influenced your practice?

It should be noted that no questions specifically probed for participant's thoughts on the book ban in schools, instead, all comments relating to books and school information systems arose organically in the interview. The researcher saved de-identified data on a private encrypted server to protect participant identities.

Positionality

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit the need for researchers to share their positionality to aid readers in understanding the unique perspective of the researcher and ways these influences findings. The researcher in this study is a cisgendered woman trained in social science research. She has experience teaching in K-12 schools outside of Iowa and identifies with constructivist epistemologies. Her work strives to reduce equity gaps and support learning for all students. She

is also an avid reader and appreciates the democratic values associated with libraries and free information systems.

Data Analysis.

The researcher used Stake's (1995) four step strategy for data analysis to examine ways participants in the study perceived Senate File 496 influenced K-12 schools information systems through the lens of Mathiesen's (2015) informational justice conceptual framework. The four step strategy includes (1) direct interpretation, (2) categorical aggregation, (3) pattern recognition, and (4) naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995). In direct interpretation, the researcher develops codes that represent participant quotes. During categorical aggregation, the researcher develops initial themes from the codes. Next, in pattern recognition, the researcher further refines these themes. Finally, in naturalistic generalizations, the researcher clarifies themes so they can more broadly be applied to the data.

Trustworthiness

The researcher ensured trustworthiness by using multiple verification strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, thick, rich descriptions and the inclusion of participant quotations foster transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher assured credibility through triangulation of interviews and ensuring there was saturation before concluding interviews. Additionally, the researcher ensured credibility and dependability by validating themes along all stages of analysis and using cross-case examination to note patterns in participant perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). What is more, the researcher engaged in bracketing during the epoch stage to bolster.

dependability. Finally, the researcher engaged in member checking to ensure participant voices were used correctly.

Limitations

Like all research inquiries, this study has limitations. First, while the researcher engaged in bracketing and identified her positionality, the complete removal of researcher bias cannot be guaranteed. Additionally, some study recruits shared with the researcher they were afraid to participate in the study out of fear they would lose their position, thus some key insights into this experience are missing. Also, while the researcher has taught in public K-12 schools, she has never taught in Iowa and may lack a more complex understanding of the school system.

Findings

The findings of this instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) guided by Mathiesen's (2015) informational justice conceptual framework examined ways educators and school board members from a predominantly rural midwestern state perceived Senate File 496 influenced school information systems. Three themes developed from the data analysis. The themes were the participants perceived Senate File 496 was imprudently discriminatory in implementation, invalidated recognition of school community identities, and threatened democratic participation in information systems. The researcher divided the first theme to examine districts with little impact, types of removal systems, and the direct implications for school libraries.

Imprudently Discriminatory Implementation

The first theme the researcher notes in the data was that there were imprudently discriminatory implementation practices across the state. The different experiences of participants highlighted drastically different implementations of Senate File 496 across different districts, which reflect inequitable informational justice (Mathisen, 2015) as iDistributive, iParticipatory, and iReccognitional justice were challenged differently across districts. This is largely due Senate File 496's lack of clarity. Sarah, a middle school English teacher pondered, "I feel like the guidelines are kind of murky, and you know, I want like a like what's the criteria that we're using?" All participants expressed concern with this lack of guidance.

Little Impact

In some districts like Claire's, a school board member, did not ban or pull any book saying they were planning "to wait and see what occurred" because the legislation lacked any clear guidance. Similarly, Kira, a high school English teacher, shared;

My administration up to this point, I have to say, has been very supportive of any decisions that I have made. And my decision as an educator was not to remove necessarily anything from my room or necessarily anything from my curriculum.

However, what I did to kind of cover myself was I wrote an extensive syllabus and in my syllabus I presented, these are the materials that I will be covering this year. And if you have an issue or a concern with them, please let me know prior to the school year beginning. I had every single one of my parents sign off on that.

Meanwhile, Christina, a middle school reading teacher who did not remove any books observed she was, "creating a lot as I go, and I'm developing the curriculum, and I am doing my own assessments and all research backed and basic types of things." She noted that while the

legislation did not result in any removal of texts, it had made her more mindful of the materials students are accessing in schools. Lexi and Haley, both high school English teachers in different districts shared their schools had not removed any texts. Lexi was perplexed recalling “in 22 years of teaching, I have never, ever had a parent say to me, ‘I don’t want my kid to read this book.’” In comparison Haley observed, “honestly, I don’t think we pulled anything...I think we were very much a wait and see kind of school.” In Tim, a superintendent’s district, few books were removed as well. He was largely unconcerned with the book ban and joked;

I do think when we talk about books and I joke about this, but in in all seriousness, I mean it you know what, at the middle school, high school level, we don't have this big line for people waiting to check out books. There's not this huge line that that like if somebody wants to read a book, let's let them read a book. Any student, any adult can get on this thing here [phone] and they can see far more graphic things or read more graphic things than anything they're going to read at any book in any library. We review our books before we purchase them, award-winning books.

Participants in these school districts expressed little anxiety over book removal yet did articulate frustration as there was no clear guidance from the state on which books to remove, resulting in education leaders scrambling to make sense of the law. In these districts, Senate File 496 largely did not disrupt informational justice systems within schools.

Community Involvement

In other districts, participants spoke of having community involvement in addressing book removal. Trent, a high school principal stated, “The path to hell is paved with good

intentions” while reflecting on the overreach of the state. He and Rob a school board member, expressed only a few books were removed in their district and there had not been a large backlash in their community. All the administrators in the study spoke of a desire to be compliant with the legislation while not believing it was student centered. They did not put controversial books on their shelf to begin with, thus as Trent recalled;

We moved one book out of the elementary and into the middle school... We had one parent call and asked, ‘Do you have this book, because if you do we want it out.’ But we did not have this book, so it was no big deal. The superintendent said [parents] called to ask about three books that were challenged, and we removed them to avoid conflict.

In districts like Bri, an elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher’s, the community was offered an opportunity to provide feedback on what books they wanted to be banned. Bri outlined this process;

We created a committee to make sure if a parent finds a book, they can bring that to the committee and it will either be removed or they will review it. But we haven’t had that happen yet.

Similarly, Stacy, a middle school teacher librarian lamented the challenges of determining what books to remove to be in compliance and observed, “[a neighboring district] had a community meeting and met with the community and decided what books they should have or not.” While Trent, Bri, and Stacy’s experiences engaging with community members reflects iParticipatory justice (Mathisen, 2015) by allowing community members to voice their viewpoints, the goals of

the community members was to restrict other identities and viewpoints in school, thus limiting anticipatory justice within the broader informational justice system.

Leadership Decisions

Other districts deferred to district leadership and attorneys to determine how to implement Senate File 496's book ban. For instance, in Jeff's, an elementary teacher, district the responsibility of book removal fell to education leaders. He recalled;

Essentially what happened is that our administration worked at putting together a list of books that they knew existed in our libraries, whether it's the actual library collection or part of the curriculum, and then shared that list with staff.

Meanwhile, Kersten, a high school assistant principal's district only scrutinized books if they were being graded. Kersten remarked, "If a teacher is going to have you be graded on an assignment, then they [the books] have to be within [the law], so you know, what about students reading this book... it is a fine line between if you are grading it, and they're reading it individually." Clearly interpretations of compliance varied drastically across districts.

In the district neighboring Kersten, Rebecca, a high school English teacher confidently identified that only books that were purchased by the district were to be examined after much worry that she would have to review her thousands of books. She recounted;

I've got thousands of books in my classroom library I've accumulated over years of teaching...I haven't read all thousand books in my classroom. [In the spring 2023] we talked about how we're going to have to have our whole classroom library catalogued and report who checks out what, and where it is in the classroom...I spiraled to the point where I just stopped listening. Then we came back in the fall and he [leadership] was

like, so actually JK [just kidding], what we've done is your classroom libraries excluded.

But, you need to pull books that we pulled from the school library.

Thus, her classroom library would remain untouched.

However, Danielle a high school English teacher lamented that in her district the guidance on what was appropriate versus inappropriate was so confusing that she donated her thousands of books outside of the school to avoid any notion that she was not in compliance with Senate File 496. Danielle commented;

All of our books have been scanned and then our school librarian has indicated which ones are appropriate for our age level in our classroom life in general. I teach seniors and there's also some study halls in my classroom, and so I would have freshmen in it. So, in general, I can't have any books on my shelf that aren't approved for 14 or older. So, then the books that I use for my curriculum have also gone through our school librarian to make sure they're okay. *The Catcher in the Rye* was flagged as not age appropriate for high school seniors, but yet *The Color Purple* was okay. So there's a little confusion on my part as to why some books aren't okay and why some are...I pulled entire classroom library and donated it to some free public libraries and some other organizations because I haven't read all the books that are on my that were on my shelves and the ones and I thought I'd done a pretty good job of clearing it out just as my shelves were empty.

Danielle's removal of texts reflects a degradation of informational systems in schools as students lost access to thousands of titles to ensure Danielle would not get in trouble with the law (Mathisen, 2015). Contrastly, Avery, a middle school English teacher, who did not remove texts

argued this was an equity issue, or iDistributive justice (Mathisen, 2015) problem because not every student, “can just go to the public library. Not every student has that ability.”

What is more, the lack of guidance from Senate File 496 also left educators with questions that leadership was unable to answer. Elly, a high school English teacher went on to question if students can bring in their own books noting that in this situation the school was not the one providing the book. Elly questioned;

I have my students do a lot of independent novel work so they can choose what book they're reading. What's changed is did they get the book from my shelf, or did they bring it from home or the public library?

Meanwhile, in Stacy, a middle school teacher librarian removed 90 books after, “spending a lot of time looking through the law”. Across these districts dramatically different approaches to implementing Senate File 496 to comply with the law were implemented reflecting erratic changes in informational systems in schools (Mathisen, 2015).

School Libraries

To further complicate matters, participants reported different challenges by school setting. Those in K-12, K-8, or even 6-8 noted that because books in the library were accessible to all students, the only books that were appropriate for all students, or the youngest students in the school, were deemed appropriate. Cindy, a high school librarian observed;

I get the idea that you want to make sure that texts are age appropriate. However, that's a spectrum. So regardless of what level you're at, whether it's five, six, eight or nine, 12 or

in smaller districts where you've got seven, 12 in one building or even 6-12 in one building, that's a very wide range of students that you're trying to serve with in the literature. So like when we pick books, we don't just willy nilly like choose things. We choose things that have won recognition and awards. We've chosen things because they meet some kind of grade level requirement or interest of the students or curriculum. It is a very intensive and lengthy process for us to choose items for the collection, and not every student will read every book.

Cindy's sentiments echo Mathisen's (2015) informational justice by noting the importance iDistributive justice, or sources that reflect the people in the community/school and their varying ages/reading levels. Amelia, a middle school special education teacher criticized the laws restriction to access, or the lack of iDistributive justice (Mathisen, 2015) from Senate File 496 by sharing: "As a parent, I would say as a parent, if you don't want your child to have access to this, that's fine. But don't ban it for everybody because every family is different. Every child, everything is different."

Consequently, spending so much time screening texts to comply with Senate File 496 teacher librarians were unable to further cultivate collections and support their existing informational systems, further chipping away at informational justice (Mathisen, 2015) efforts. Ava, a middle school Social Studies teacher conveyed; "So like I feel like school librarians, like, are just totally getting hammered with this and like, you know, and, and so like, I feel very, very deeply for them." Skylar, a high school teacher librarian who screened 7000 books, confessed;

I spent basically the first four months of the school year looking at every single book in our library to determine if it has a description or visual depiction of a sexual act as

defined by Iowa law and it was horrible. Like, not only do I have a problem with it morally and ethically, but, like, you spend that much time just looking for sex in books and you start feeling kind of gross, right? And ended up having a really bad effect on my mental health to be to be doing all of this.

Sam, a high school teacher librarian went on to express her job had transformed from teacher librarian to being a full-time screeners for rape and blow jobs;

I'm just reading for rape and blow jobs. Yeah. And they just looked at me and we hadn't had a staff meeting yet about, like the full building wide implications and what it specifically means for us. And it wasn't until later when we had that meeting that I had several teachers come to me and say, I had no idea this is what your job has become now. Like, Yeah, when I said I was reading for blow jobs, I wasn't kidding.

The teacher librarians in the study spoke of immense lost time fostering thoughtful collections that mirror the community and needs of the school in conjunction with informational justice (Mathisen, 2015).

Paradoxically, after the federal government placed a temporary injunction on Senate File 496's book ban, participants still spoke to discriminatory implementation practices. In Cindy and Avery's districts, they were able to return books to the shelves immediately. However, in situations like Danielle's, educators were unaware there was an injunction, nor could she undonate her books. Moreover, Rob shared it simply was too much work to put books back and the state of the book ban would hold until the injunction and appeal had been figured out in the

courts. Rob equated to frequent changes to “culture wars and we get whipped around as school districts.” Therefore, even with temporary protections in place, the damage was already done.

Invalidated Recognition of School Community Identities

The second finding in the study was that participants noted Senate File 496 invalidated recognition of school community identities. This theme correlates with the second component of informational justice, iParticipatory justice (Mathisen, 2015). For the iParticipatory aspect of informational justice to be successful, all members of the community must have opportunities to express themselves and aid in developing the information available. However, participants in the study largely felt Senate File 496 silenced and marginalized LGBTQ+ students and students who experienced sexual violence. For example, Avery suggested the point of the legislation was to;

send a message to our students in the queer community and to our families in the queer communities that we are not willing to fight for them, that we believe that their existence is inappropriate or we will stand by while people in authority, a.k.a the state, tell us that these people are inappropriate and that these families are inappropriate. I have students with two moms at home who used to talk about it and no longer do because now it's stigmatized. Now it's made to be another “ism”.

Similarly, in defense of LGBTQ+ student's Elly shared; “I haven't pulled any of the literature in my classroom that deals with LGBTQ+ issues.” Elly speaks to a belief of protecting iParticipatory and iRecognitional justice in her classroom, while Avery highlights the consequences of chipping away at iParticipatory and iRecognitional justice (Mathisen, 2015).

Maud, a middle school counselor also discussed ways Senate Fiel 496 influenced her curriculum when she anguished;

When I was hired here in 2020, I was asked to help deal with the quote unquote, racial issues. And I was like, ‘Well, we can't just talk about race, we need to talk about all parts of identity.’ And so, then I picked this curriculum...on bias and challenging bias. And then I did that for three years, but then I dropped it this year. I did not teach it because I was worried about my job and how now there's this law in Iowa, so I don't ever bring up gender identity or sexual orientation to sixth graders

In this regard, Maud notes the importance of informational justice within a curricular context.

In some districts like Kira's, texts like *Anne Frank* were being challenged. She weighed the importance of reading books on oppression compared to “a little innuendo, possible something sexual is happening.... The books they want removed are just asinine.” Not only are these texts important to understanding historical events, but they are also key parts of literature curriculum. Taylor, a board of education member, tried to explain this through her observation that;

My daughter's a junior and she's taking the college level class and it's interpersonal communication. And in that textbook, there's a chapter on romantic relationships and how does that look? And people would I said, you know, intimacy is a part of that, but the community just has a general ignorance.

Skylar extended this by highlighting the importance of students being able to read about sexual assault when she shared; “If somebody's sexually assaulted in a book, we can keep reading to see

here's what they did that helped them recover from it. They went on to have a good life despite this horrible thing that happened to them.” Sam was indignant at this silencing explaining;

I have a lot of the books that I had to remove were because they were nonfiction books that included survivors accounts of sexual assault that I've had to pull, or they were stories that included sex and so blow jobs but that's not what the book is about. Not at all what the book is about. But you know, it had that that one scene that one paragraph in one case it was five words and I had to remove a book.

Stacy was appalled saying books in schools are not porn;

I think that someone got her undies in a bunch because they someone said this is pornography in schools and she doesn't understand...and how would they know unless they read some of these books that are not meant to titillate, that are not pornographic, that someone just said, ‘hey, we got to get these out of here.’ And you know, that's because of the way our legislature is set up. That's how it went. So that's why I say we're doing a grave disservice to students.

Participant experiences reflect an erosion of participatory justice (Mathisen, 2015) in the school settings. Instead, the participants in this study felt the schools were actively silencing LGBTQ+ and sexual assault survivors. Brian, a high school science teacher, considered the limiting of information systems pointless considering the presence of the internet. He reasoned;

The idea that you would try and ban knowledge or ban words and ban sentences is just asinine because if they want to get wind of something and figure something out and search for it, they can find it themselves. I mean, the book banning thing is silly now.

Brian's comment reflects the existence a larger informational system as a result of internet access, but not the school's role in informational justice systems.

However, other educators critiqued the legislation because it challenges informational justice systems in schools. Wholistically, Cindy critiqued;

I vehemently disagree that we have students who are 17 and 18 years old and that they can't access literature that's appropriate for them because we're only worrying about the students who are 13 and 14. And we're only worrying about the students who come from families who have chosen not to digest the literature of a more mature future. And that's their choice. I just think it puts them at a disservice and does not set them up for success in the real world.

Sarah, was more succinct by stating, "My stance on it, I feel like if I remove books from my bookshelves, then I am taking away opportunities for kids." Additionally, Bailey, a middle school counselor raised concerns about not addressing events that children in school experience. As Bailey warned;

How do you expect to educate our kids? Because some of them are not going to get it at home about sex, their identity, sexual safety. Those types of things, because relationships are happening as young as fourth, fifth, sixth grade. They're sixth graders who get pregnant like, what do you expect to happen as far as the safety and security of the children who already know what they're trying to ban because they've learned it from other places? And possibly incorrect information because their places are not fact checked.

The concerns were echoed by Greg, a middle school principal who agrees with ensuring books in school are appropriate and warned;

You have to educate kids, how to read books and how to take. I think that falls on educators and I think they don't think we've done a good job. And so they're taking that responsibility away from us or they're afraid we won't do a good job.

Across these educators there was an understanding of informational justice (Mathisen, 2015) and the responsibility for schools to distribute diverse, rigorous, vetted informational materials to diverse students.

Nevertheless, there are educators and board of education members who feel Senate File 496 does not restrict library systems and instead helps protect students. As Talia, a high school Special Education teacher expounded;

There's 100 books you can have in the library and they don't have to have sexual acts in them. You know, there's really great literature out there. Now, if a parent at home thinks that's okay, then that's their that's their right to do that. But I don't think in the school any of that should be promoted. And as a parent, I would have never wanted my child to be able to go into the library and get a book that I would deem inappropriate... I think parents have the first right. The schools don't. We're trying to treat kids like adults. And they're not. They don't have the ability to process, you know, a lot of stuff that's going on. They just don't even, you know, talking about good touch, bad touch and all that kind of thing. It's the hard stuff. And, you know, they're just it's just hard for them. Why can't they just be innocent for a while? Until they're not, you know. You know, why can't they

be? I just I don't understand why we're trying to put all these adult problems on children.

I don't get it.

Talia's desire to protect students was shared by participants, though what the means of protecting students and what students were being protected from varied across participants. Yet, Lacie, Christina, and Penny also spoke of the importance of parental rights. However, to these participants there lacked a clear understanding of what parental rights in conjunction with informational justice systems would look like.

Threaten Democratic Participation in Information Systems

Guided by Mathisen's (2015) informational justice framework, the third theme to emerge from the research was the participants in the study thought Senate File 496 threatened democratic participation in school information systems. This finding speaks to an attack on the iRecognition justice outlined by Mathisen (2015) as Senate File 496 prevents school information systems ability to reflect all members in the community. This manifested in lack of community participation in library information systems, and removal of texts that reflect identities and experiences of school community members, specifically LGBTQ+ students and sexual assault survivors.

To begin with, participants spoke of a complete breakdown of traditional systems to address concerns and queries. Typically, if a parent has a concern they email the teacher/school directly. However, Cindy and Anastasia were perplexed by the audacity of community members stating if they wanted a book removed, parents were emailing legislators instead of contacting the school or librarian directly. Anastasia, a high school English teacher was astonished when

she said; “If you were to see some of these emails coming at teachers, those legislators are cc’ed in their email.” Cindy further expanded by saying;

It has always been and will continue to be, that if you don't want your child to read a book, you can request that they don't and I am happy to follow that. That has always been the way that it has been. All it requires you to do is talk to me, email me, pick up the phone and say something to me. This idea of villainizing my position name calling me, putting me on emails with politicians, belittling me on a personal level just because I'm doing my job is insane to me.

Many schools already have systems like the one Cindy references in place. Talia shared, “you need to trust your librarians, and if you have questions, then go talk to them. And then as a parent, ‘hey, I don't want my kid checking these out.’ I think we have to honor parents' requests.” In this regard, Talia and Cindy offer an example of ways parents can oversee what their child reads, while still allowing access to diverse texts for all students, ideally supporting informational justice systems (Mathisen, 2015).

Additionally, participants in the study largely viewed the book ban to reflect efforts to remove LGBTQ+ texts from schools. As Avery proclaimed, “The intent of the law is specifically to target the marginalized community of LGBTQ students. Period. Legislators have said it out loud.” Indeed, many of the removed texts were LGBTQ+ related. Elly and Rebecca also scrutinized this point. Rebecca observed;

Taking away an avenue to do that at a time when it can be really, really impactful, feels intentionally cruel and even if we let go of assuming malice, when stupidity is maybe a more accurate descriptor, it feels irrevocably misguided.

Avery and Rebecca's observations address direct attacks on iParticipatory aspects of informational justice systems in schools (Mathisen, 2015).

Other participants in the study voiced concern that many of the text that were removed from schools, like *Speak*, in Ari, a high school English teacher's school, addressed rape and sexual violence and provided guidance on ways for survivors to overcome these experiences. Many participants made distinct efforts to address "rape and sex are not the same thing" as Ari stated. They went further to state the idea of using Iowa's Sex Code was asinine as there are already systems in place to protect students and ensure school libraries incorporate texts appropriate for the students. Cindy pushed back clarifying;

So, I don't think that's adhering to precedent, legal precedent. But at the same time, there's also legal precedent, especially in libraries, to ensure that students have access to a wide array of ideas and ideologies, regardless of whether or not they are perceived as controversial or mature or whatever. Again, that's what our selection policies are for. Furthermore, Lexi shared *Looking for Alaska*, was banned, and it was a unique text that used a female protagonist as she struggles to overcome a sexual assault and battles mental health issues as a result. Lexi further described this text;

I keep referencing *Looking for Alaska*, because that's the one that people are all like up arms about *Looking for Alaska* is about so much more necessary topics; suffering. Helplessness, how to live with stuff that we don't have answers to than it is about the two lines of blow job. You know, it's about so much more than that.

Finally, Avery expressed concern that the wording of Senate File 496 was so broad it allowed people to selectively discriminate. Many schools removed *The Absolutely True Diary of A Part-Time Indian*, a unique text speaking to the experiences of a Native American student attending an all-White high school off his reservation. Lexi shared schools banned this book because there is a sentence stating the protagonist discovered masturbation. Because of this sentence, this renowned text addressing societal challenges and giving voice to the experience of Native American youth on, and off reservations is no longer permissible. Similarly, in Penny, a high school special education teacher's school,

some parents complained and took pictures of some of that graphic novel pictures and words [in *Persepolis*]. And it was banned from our school for the rest of the year, so they had to stop using it. When they were almost done with the book.

Collectively, the silencing of LGBTQ+ identities, sexual assault survivors, and marginalized populations reflects a complete failure of Senate File 496 to align with iRecognitional justice (Mathisen, 2015).

However, few participants shared the legislation was not a book ban and felt people were overreacting. As Lacie shared;

I think, you know, one of the sort of my most common trigger, uh, about it now is when the term book banning gets thrown around, because I that feels very dog whistle. Because if students want to get access to those books, there are a lot of ways they can get access to those books. So, it's not and we're not banning them, we're just saying that they're not going to be accessible through the specifically through the school community. If we're

going to say that that's a book ban, then basically every single book that we don't choose to have at school, you know, could be termed as also being banned. And I just find that to be actually really irritating. And I think if you just remove that language, I think that actually it would calm down the polarization

Laci's opinion would suggest Senate File 496 did not hinder informational justice systems in schools (Mathisen, 2015), as information systems do not offer every text, thus the law simply adds more guidance on what to include in school libraries but does not actively ban texts.

Discussion

The researcher designed this instrumental case study to explore Iowa educator and school board members perceptions of how Senate File 496 influenced school information systems. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Mathisen's (2015) informational justice. The findings of the study highlight educators and board of education members noted Senate File 496 failed to effectively implement the iDistributive justice, iParticipatory justice, and the iRecognitional justice components of informational justice. The three themes that emerged were participants perceived Senate File 496 was imprudently discriminatory in implementation, invalidated recognition of school community identities, and threatened democratic participation in information systems. Thus on the whole, Senate File 496 is the antagonist of informational justice. Instead, the removal of these materials prevents school information system's ability to successfully implement informational justice by limiting inclusivity and cultural competency and further perpetuating harmful stereotypes regarding marginalized peoples. In this regard, the findings of this study offer an example of what happens when best practices are not implemented

in school information systems as suggested by existing literature (AASL, 2024; American Library Association, 2017; Lupton, 2016, Reed, 2018; Zhang, 2022).

By contrast, the implementation of Senate File 496 fails to consider the social justices imbedded within the larger school and institutional systems, while shifting cultural bias from practice into law (Mathisen, 2015). In part, this occurs through removal of inclusive curriculum in classes, and moreover, librarians cannot advocate, inform coordinate, or curate fully, cannot represent student body as suggested by the (AASL, 2024). Moreover, the school libraries across the state are all to follow the same AASL (2024) guidelines and standards, however, the dramatically different approaches to implementing Senate Fiel 496 reflect wildly inequitable implementation across the state. The removal of curriculum reflects iDistributive justice restrictions, while the inability to curate content to the student or allow students to participate in developing content represents a failure in iParticipatory justice, resulting in students being unable to see themselves in school information systems, reflecting a shortfall in iRecognitional justice (Mathisen, 2015) by silencing the existence of LGBTQ+ students as also observed by Zhang (2022). The limited access to diverse resources and perspectives further limits informational systems as it removes access to resources that aid in the ability to problem solve and broaden perspectives as called for by AASL (2024) and American Library Association, (2017). Moreover, Senate File 496 resulted in an outsourcing of school informational vetting systems to uneducated, unskilled, untrained population, confounding teacher librarian role with the community and conflicting with AASL standards (2024) and preventing efforts to cultivate robust information systems as suggested by Reed (2018).

Nevertheless, Senate File 496 aligns with rising rates of book bans (Langrock et al., 2023; Rhen, 2023; Zhang, 2022). These bans largely target LGBTQ+ peoples, thus one cannot easily accept these are child protection laws. If they were, books on severe violence would be broadly removed, not books on ideology. Participants in this study struggled with this notion noting that the Bible, which has strong violence, and sexual scenes was left on shelves, as well as many extremely violent novels, suggesting the state cares more about silencing LGBTQ+ identities than reducing community violence. This notion is supported by Kline et al. (2022), who note that laws that aim to exclude are linked to increased rates of interpersonal violence. While there are those who argue these laws are parental rights protection laws and believe these types of laws can prevent youth from becoming LGBTQ+ (Nguyen, 2023), participants in this study largely note that these laws instead hurt all children by fostering bigoted environments, extending the work of Marracini et al. (2022) reflecting inclusive schools create better environments for all students. This is especially important to consider against the *Tinker* test (*Tinker v Des Moines*, 1968), as no participant in this study noted any unjust disruptions to the school as a result of the presence of any LGBTQ+ resources.

Implications for Practice

While there were some participants who wanted to protect children, the notion of protecting students' innocence fails to acknowledge or understand the diverse experience of K-12 youth. For many students, the resources in schools may be their only access to resources to cope with their situation. In this regard, the child's innocence some wish to protect is a privilege of the few. Efforts to reduce access to vetted information further marginalize and endanger othered students as a byproduct of some guardians being unable or unwilling to have

uncomfortable, necessary conversations with their child. It is the duty of guardian to help their child make sense of the world around them and when guardians are unable to, or children lack them, this role traditionally falls to the school (Grimes, 2022). Moreover, there are already systems in place for parents to opt students out of lessons that conflict with their ideologies (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Instead, the creation of Senate File 496 reflects contemporary political trends and a potential failure of schools to educate parents about their FERPA rights, suggesting schools need to do more to educate their parents to ensure all students receive the best appropriate education for their circumstances.

Future Research

Large scale book bans across states is relatively new. As time progresses, more research is warranted on the longitudinal implications of book bans on student populations, especially students from underrepresented minorities. Additionally, while some participants in the study told the researcher they were retiring early or looking to leave teaching as a result of Senate File 496 and similar legislation, there lacks a formal inquiry between the implementation of book bans and teacher retention. Finally, more work is needed to understand the dichotomy between banning books in schools within environments of the internet and free access to uncensored information.

Conclusion

Senate File 496 represents a predominantly rural midwestern state's book ban which silences LGBTQ+ peoples. Instead of restricting access for all, proponents should first educate themselves on the systems already in place to support their parenting style and value set. When

schools are restricted in providing access to diverse vetted resources everyone is restricted as their ability to critically think, analyze, and freedom of choice is removed. Public schools are not exempt from ensuring students' and staffs' constitutional rights. Moreover, Iowa has a robust school voucher, home, and private school systems that provide an alternative for families who feel their values are threatened by public schools. In the end, Senate File 496's book ban and prevention of gender discussion and similar legislations across the nation threaten the foundational democratic principles of the United States public school system.

Funding Acknowledgement

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, through grant R305B220014 to The University of Iowa. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Institute of Education Sciences or the University of Iowa.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Role	School Setting	Years in Ed	Pseudonym	Role	School Setting	Years in Ed
Amelia	7-12 SPED	Rural	5	Kersten	High School Associate Principal	City	12
Anastasia	High School English	Rural	30	Kira	High School English	Rural	28
Ari	High School English	Rural	4	Lacie	BOE**	Town	2
Ava	Middle School Social Studies	Suburb	12	Lexi	High School English	Town	22
Avery	Middle School English	Suburb	10	Maud	Middle School Counselor	Town	17
Bailey	Elementary Counselor	Rural	8	Penny	High School SPED	Town	22
Brain	High School Science	Town	7	Rebecca	High School English	Rural	8
Christina	Middle School Reading	Rural	23	Rob	BOE	City	24

Cindy	High School*** Librarian	Suburb	13	Sam	High School Librarian	Rural	31
Claire	BOE	Rural	1	Sarah	Middle School English	City	11
Danielle	High School English	Rural	30	Skylar	High School Librarian	Suburb	13
Elly	High School English	Town	18	Stacy	Middle School Librarian	Suburb	25
Greg	Middle School Principal	Rural		Talia	High School SPED	Rural	27
Haley	High School English	Rural	3	Taylor	BOE	City	16
Jeff	Elementary Teacher	Rrual	19	Tim	Superintendent	Town	20
				Trent	Principal	Rural	13

Note. *SPED denotes Special Education.**BOE- Board of Education, ***Librarians are known

as Teacher Librarians across the state as they are also responsible for content and skill instruction for the entire school population.