



LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TOOLKIT CLASSROOM CENSORSHIP



ACLU
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Let's talk about how we can all fight classroom censorship in South Dakota.



Decisions made during the annual sessions of the South Dakota Legislature have a deep and lasting impact on our state's people and communities. As new laws are created and others repealed or written, it's important to ensure that these changes preserve and strengthen our constitutional rights.

The ACLU of South Dakota monitors a wide range of issues at the legislature. Our education, organizing, and lobbying efforts are aimed at informing both lawmakers and the public about the civil rights and civil liberties implications of the bills proposed by our elected officials. The stakes are high for legislative action in 2022, and we must defend and protect the civil liberties of all South Dakotans.

CLASSROOM CENSORSHIP LEGISLATION IS AN AFFRONT TO FREE SPEECH.

Imagine learning about Christopher Columbus but not being able to talk about the experiences of the Indigenous people already living on the land. Or being a high school history teacher and not being allowed to use terms like "systemic racism" to teach about slavery and its longstanding impacts that perpetuate discrimination for Black people today.

IN SOME STATES ACROSS THE COUNTRY, THIS ISN'T JUST A HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION. IT'S HAPPENING.

In the past several months, there has been a proliferation of efforts across the country to restrict the teaching of so-called "divisive concepts." This nationwide push is part of a concerted and coordinated effort to limit teacher and student rights, free speech, and hinder the discussion of racial justice issues in classrooms. At least a dozen states, including Montana and North Dakota, have taken state-level action or passed legislation to ban critical race theory, a high-level academic framework mostly used by legal scholars to examine how policies and laws perpetuate systemic racism.

What was once an obscure concept, however, is now a catchall term for any discussion of race or gender or topics that make some people uncomfortable. And it's natural that many will interpret a ban on critical race theory to mean a ban on discussing or raising issues of race or gender in the classroom at all. Preventing discussion about race and racism like this is harmful to all students – but particularly for students of color.

The more South Dakota students can learn about our history – the good, the bad and the ugly – and the lessons it can teach us, the better prepared they will be to tackle the inequities and injustices present in our communities. Every student should have the right to receive an inclusive education and have an open and honest dialogue about America's history. All students deserve access to culturally relevant teaching, equitable resources, and a safe learning environment. It is also an affront to free speech, a value and a right that should be held in the highest regard. Anything less is classroom censorship, pure and simple.



Everyone has the ability to make change.



START BY CONNECTING WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS

Your elected officials are all in office for one reason: to represent you. They need and want to hear from you. Contact them and let them know where you stand on the issues!

With the exception of those in leadership roles, most elected officials in South Dakota have no staff or admin team. That means your senator and representatives will be the ones answering when you contact them. The amount of response an elected official gets on a certain issue can help determine its importance in their eyes. For example, if an elected official is getting a dozens of calls, emails, and letters saying “vote NO on XYZ,” it will make a big impression. Conversely, if they’re not hearing anything from their constituents, they’ll assume no one cares or what they are doing is permissible. Do you know who your legislators are? Or what their thoughts are on issues that matter to you? Find their contact information at sdlegislature.gov or use your smartphone to scan the QR code on the top right.

Whether you’re calling or writing your elected officials, **tact is key. Be kind, be firm, be honest, and share your personal story.** Facts are important, but personal and relatable stories can play a powerful role in changing hearts, minds, and votes.

- **Make it short and sweet:** If your elected official is receiving dozens of letters or calls about certain hot-button issues, you’ll want to make your point quickly and directly.
- **Tell your story and make it personal:** The more personal your letter is, the more compelling it will be. Tell your elected official how their decisions affect you, your family, and your friends.
- **Problem, solution, action:** In the letter be sure to include the problem, the solution, and the action you want to see taken. (i.e. “*South Dakota students need thoughtful, serious conversations about our nation’s painful history, its legacy, and the lessons it has to offer us today. Vote on HB 123.*”)

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear Lawmaker,

I’m writing in today with extreme concern about Senate Bill 1234.

Every student should have the right to receive an equitable education and have an open and honest dialogue about America’s history, race, and gender issues. Education is a tool of empowerment put to its highest use when teachers and students are given the full scope of their constitutional rights to engage in comprehensive, meaningful, and sometimes difficult conversations.

Equal access to learning about our country’s history – the good, the bad, and the ugly – in our educational institutions is important. Please vote no on Senate Bill 1234.

Thank you.

MORE WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

Get to know your legislators: What committees do they serve on? What is their professional background? This information can be helpful in building a relationship with your lawmakers and talking to them about civil liberties issues. Go to sdlegislature.gov to access their contact information. South Dakota legislators can be reached at 605-773-3251 during session.

Follow along at home: Find live and recorded audio of committee and floor hearings on South Dakota Public Broadcasting’s Statehouse website or the SD.Net app. Follow #SDLeg on Twitter for breaking news and coverage.

Attend a legislative coffee or cracker barrel: These public forums are where you can connect with your legislators. Coffees and cracker barrels are often planned by local community groups or chambers of commerce. Don’t miss your chance to hear your elected officials’ views and ask them questions about topics that matter most to you and your community!

Get your friends involved to help stop classroom censorship.

The more people who can engage with legislative advocacy, the better. Your elected officials will respond if they feel like there's a groundswell of support or opposition from their constituents. It only takes a few voices to make a big impact!

Ask your family and friends. The best way to start is with the people closest to you in the community. Let your family and friends know what you are up to and they'll be excited to help you out.

Talk about the issue of classroom censorship in community spaces. Are you a member of a local civic organization, do you attend a place of worship regularly, or are you involved with a local sports team? Any one of these places could be an opportunity to find an ally. By dipping your toe in the water in these spaces with people you already know, you might be surprised at how many like-minded people you find.

Make it fun. Consider hosting a house party or happy hour (either virtual or in-person). This is a great opportunity to share the goals and resources from this toolkit with your team and get them excited about making a real difference in your communities. It's also an opportunity to have a little fun in the process.

Keep them connected. Consider starting a Facebook group or an email/text chain for your legislative advocacy efforts. Share advocacy materials and updates from the movement, post local events that might be of interest, and consider organizing regular check-ins or meetups. The goal is to keep everyone informed and engaged. Note: If you decide to do regular meetups (either virtually or in-person), this is a great opportunity share your personal stories and brainstorm testimony ideas as a group.



**PLEDGE TO STOP
CLASSROOM
CENSORSHIP IN
SOUTH DAKOTA
BY SCANNING
THE QR CODE
ABOVE.**

Share your story.



WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper can be an extremely effective way to influence public opinion and shape legislators' views. Letters to the editor reach a large audience and are often monitored by public officials. Plus, they're fun to read. The "Letter to the Editor" section is often one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper!

Follow these tips:

- **Keep it short.** Most newspapers have strict limits on the length of letters and have limited space to publish them. Typically aim for 200 words.
- **Make it personal.** Share your own story or experiences – don't worry about trying to be an expert. Start by talking about who you are, then describe a problem or concern, then talk about a solution.
- **Include your contact information.** Many newspapers will only print a letter to the editor after calling the author to verify their identity and address. Newspapers will not give out that information, and will usually only print your name and city should your letter be published.
- **Sign it and send it to one of your local newspapers.** Check out aclusd.org/editor or scan the link on the bottom right of this page.

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Every student should have the right to receive an equitable education and have an open and honest dialogue about America's history. That's why I oppose HB 1234, legislation that would censor academic discussions about American history and race and sex in South Dakota public school classrooms.

Education is a tool of empowerment put to its highest use when teachers and students are given the full scope of their constitutional rights to engage in comprehensive, meaningful, and sometimes difficult conversations. This legislation is a direct affront to the constitutional rights of teachers and students across South Dakota by restricting conversations around race and sex in our schools.

The First Amendment protects academic freedom and the right to share ideas, including the right of individuals to receive information and knowledge. Instead of encouraging learning, this legislation effectively gags educators and students from talking about issues of the most profound national importance such as the impact of systemic racism and sexism in our society. Simply put, this is a blatant attempt to suppress speech that some may disfavor. I encourage all legislators to vote no on HB 1234.

WHERE TO PUBLISH YOUR LETTER

Make sure your message is heard by publishing to your local newspaper or a statewide publication. Here are a few publications to consider.

- Brookings Register
- Argus Leader
- Rapid City Journal
- Pierre Capital Journal
- Bryant Dakotan
- Dakota Herald
- Freeman Courier
- Lakota Country Times
- Miller Press
- Sioux Valley News
- Yankton Press & Dakotan



Use social media to create change.

Social media is a powerful tool to use to build momentum around your opposition to classroom censorship and to educate your community. You can use social media to rally and thank your supporters and to respond to your opposition. Be sure to use relevant hashtags like #SDLeg or #HiFromSD when posting on Twitter and Instagram. If you see your friends posting content during session, be sure to retweet and like their commentary! It will help ensure your message gets across, too.

Use various social media platforms to reach different audiences.

- Use **Facebook** to reach supporters broadly. Post content on your own personal Facebook wall to create interest or share in advocacy groups and invite your current friends to join.
- Use **Twitter** to insert yourself into the conversation and reach a substantial number of users, even members of the media. When using Twitter, make sure you use relevant hashtags in your tweets. Consider using handles to call out or speak directly to other Twitter users too. This tactic can be a great way to informally engage with your lawmakers. Find their handles at aclusd.org/sdleg-twitter.
- Use **Instagram** to reach a variety of people who are passionate about the issues in a visual way. Use relevant hashtags in your posts and stories. You can easily direct people to message you on how to get involved.

SAMPLE POSTS

Feel free to modify and personalize these – put them in your own voice and add who you are (“As a parent...,” “As a teacher...,” “As a student...,” “As a South Dakotan...”).

• **We should support our teachers, not threaten funding to their schools if they teach students about our nation’s history of racial oppression. Vote no on HB 1234.**

• **South Dakota students need thoughtful, serious conversations about our nation’s painful history, its legacy, and the lessons it has to offer us today. Vote no on HB 1234.**

• **HB 1234 will erase America’s painful history of racism and oppression from South Dakota classrooms – a legacy that still impacts our country today. Our legislators should do right thing and vote no on this ugly, dangerous bill.**

• **Our students deserve better than HB 1234, which glorifies a past rooted in white supremacy while silencing the experiences of all who have suffered through inequalities that exist today.**

• **The ability to discuss and debate ideas, even those that some find uncomfortable, is a crucial part of our democracy. House Bill 1234 demonstrates the very need for the types of education our legislature is trying to prohibit.**

WHERE TO FIND THE ACLU

The ACLU of South Dakota regularly posts content on social media and our website. You can find the ACLU of South Dakota on the following platforms and by visiting aclusd.org/social.

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- LinkedIn



ACLU
South Dakota



**Extend your advocacy beyond the
Legislative Session by following the
ACLU on social media, getting email
alerts, and more.**

Real change starts with you and every one of us can help make a difference. ACLU of South Dakota activists help turn our state's most cherished principles into reality.

The ACLU of South Dakota is the foremost civil rights and liberties organization - and we are a movement of people fighting together for justice, freedom, fairness, and equality for all.

- **Follow the ACLU on social media:** aclusd.org/social
- **Get alerted and informed:** aclusd.org/alerts
- **Find more resources to deepen your knowledge as an advocate in South Dakota:** aclusd.org/sdleg-resources