

Reading Rainbow: Examining Self-Censorship Practices of Middle & High School Libraries Toward LGBTQIA+ YA Literature in Wake & Gaston County, NC



Elias Horowitz, *History and Public Policy*
Advised by: Dr. William Goldsmith, *Department of Public Policy*

Research funded by a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship from the OUR at UNC-CH.

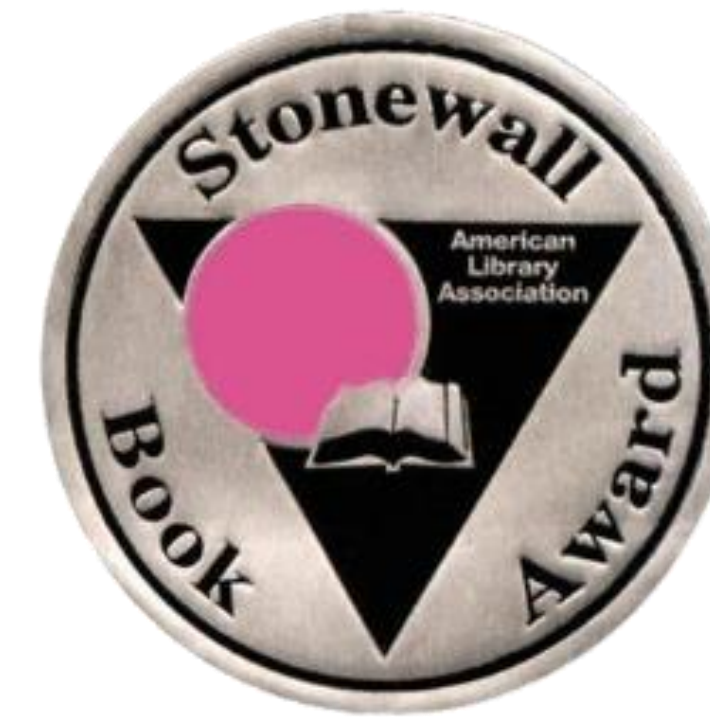
Background

- Between 2021 and 2023, **189+** book challenges were issued across NC's 115 public school districts (1)
- The most commonly challenged books center on topics of **race/racism** or **LGBT+** identities (2)
- Materials challenge policies face amendments at the county and state levels
 - Wake County Policy 3210 and SB 90 (3)

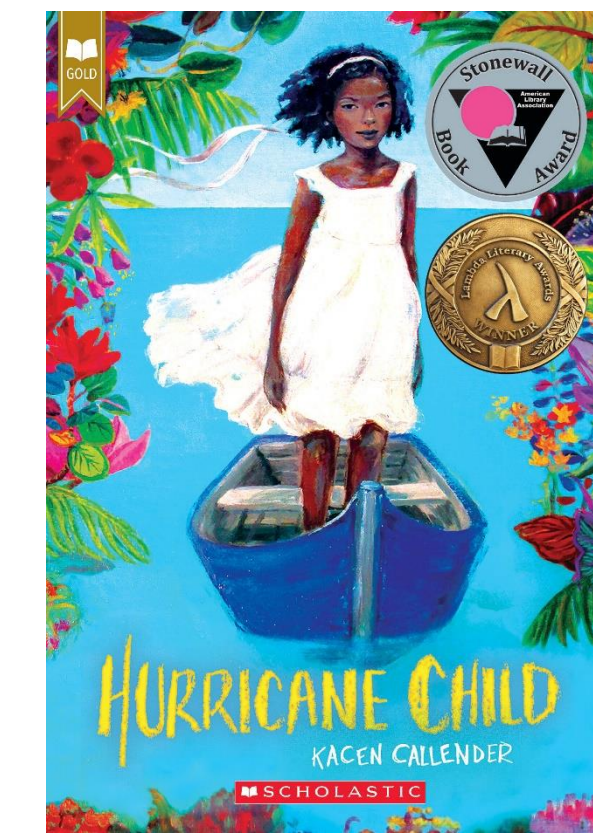
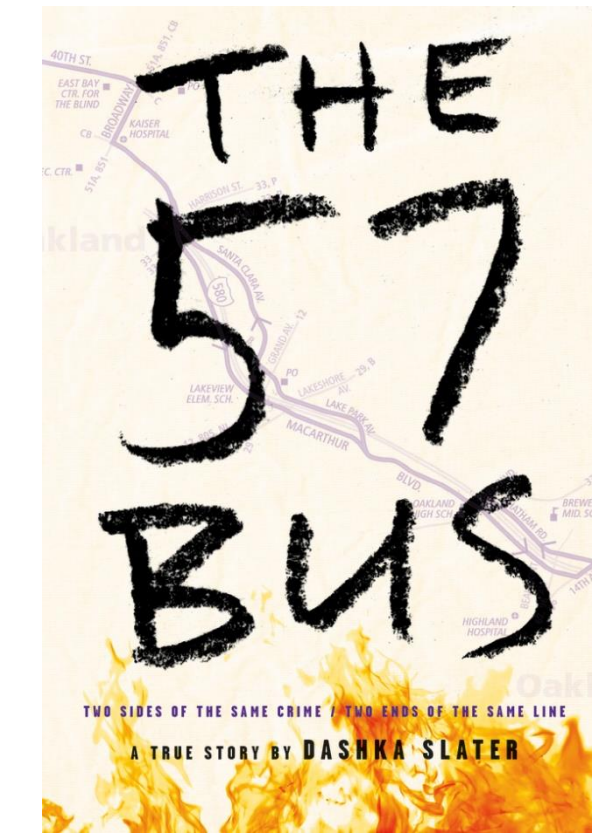
Self-Censorship: *Preemptive exclusion of materials containing controversial topics by schools, librarians, or teachers in order to avoid potential challenges.*

Catalogue Audit Findings

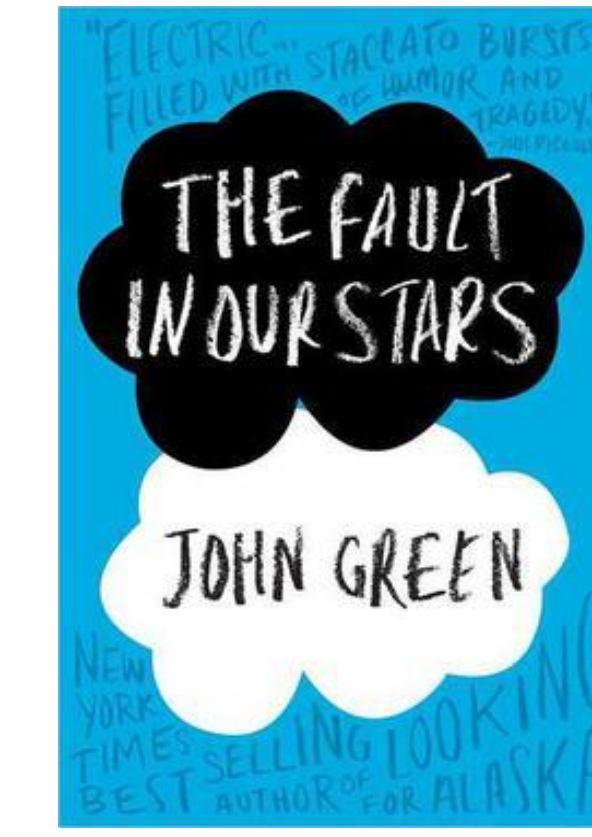
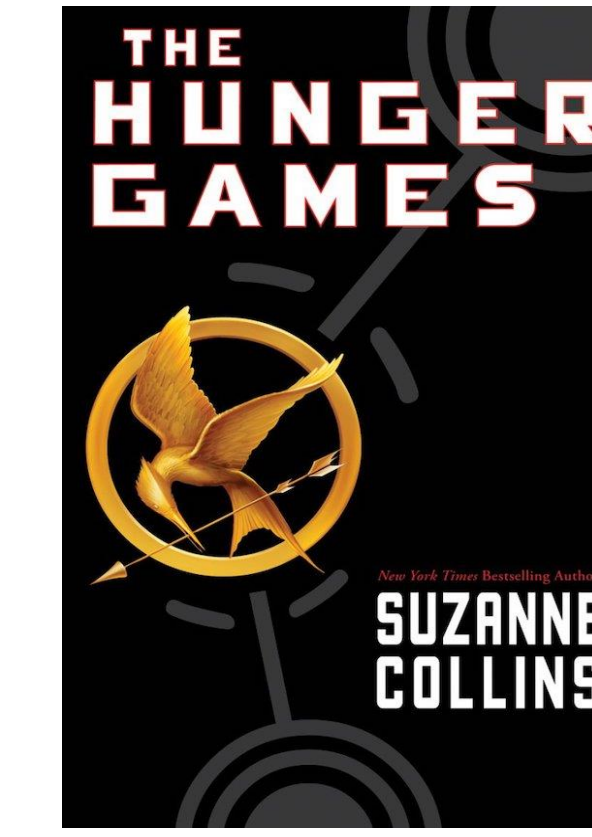
- 96%** of middle school libraries had <50% of List A, indicating self-censorship of LGBT+ materials
 - 6/51** middle school libraries also had <50% of List B, indicating possible budgetary constraints
- 51%** of high school libraries had <50% of List A, indicating self-censorship of LGBT+ materials
 - 1/37** high school libraries also had <50% of List B, indicating possible budgetary constraints
- On average, schools of any grade had 9-11 more List B than List A books**



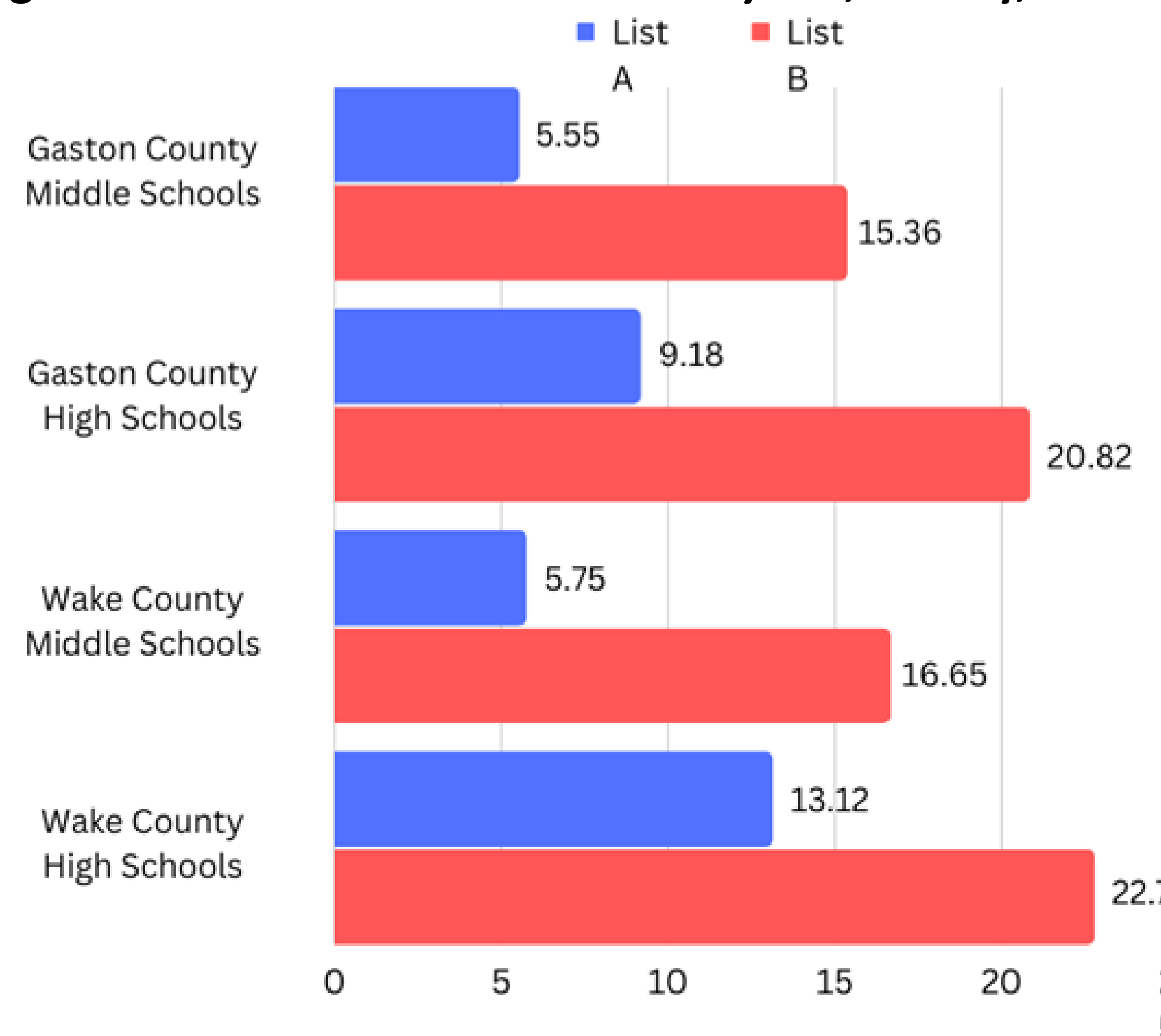
List A LGBT+ Middle Grades/ YA



List B Popular Middle Grades/ YA



Avg. Number of Books in Collection by List, County, and Grade Level



Quotes from Librarian Survey Responses

"[Challenges are] always on our minds. We don't choose or not choose specific books based on the potential for backlash but overall the increase in book challenges has a chilling effect."

"I'm not up for a fight so I lean towards not taking risks with my collection."

"I have seen first-hand the positive effects that having a diverse collection has on my students, and I will not let name-calling affect... my students' access to a diverse collection."

Methodology

Mixed methods approach utilizing a **quantitative list search/audit of library catalogues** and a **mixed methods survey** of librarians with written response sections.

List search: searching Destiny by Follett online school library catalogues in 88 Wake and Gaston Co. middle and high schools for **25 List A (LGBT+)** middle grades/YA books and **25 List B (Control)** middle grades/YA

- <50% of List A alone indicates some level of self-censorship (4)
- <50% List B indicates budgetary or staffing constraints may contribute to a smaller collection overall

Survey Findings & Conclusions

- When asked if they believed their libraries "contain a sufficient number of books featuring LGBT+ characters or themes":
 - 5/13** respondents *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*
 - 8/13** respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed*
- 23.1%** of respondents stated that they or their school had dealt with a **book challenge** from a community member or organization in the past five years

Conclusion: Wake and Gaston Co. librarians perceive of their collections as more representative of LGBT+ populations than they are, on average. **Over half of all high schools and almost all middle schools** across Wake and Gaston County combined **exhibit signs of self-censorship of LGBT+ content** in their collections. School librarians report increasing challenges have impacted their work, with some shifting towards a conservative approach while others **brace to combat challenges**. Further collection audits for diversity are recommended.

1- "Books on race, sexuality among most targeted across N.C. schools." WUNC, March 15, 2023, <https://www.wunc.org/education/2023-03-15/books-on-race-sexuality-among-most-targeted-across-n-c-schools>.

2- "THE 10 MOST BANNED BOOKS OF THE 2021-2022 SCHOOL YEAR" Pen America, December 2022, <https://pen.org/banned-books-list-2022/>.

3- Brown, Chantal. "Wake Schools Formalizes Policy on Book Challenges, Appeals" Indy Week, July 2023, <https://indyweek.com/news/wake/wake-schools-formalizes-policy-on-book-challenges-appeals/>.

4- Coley, Ken P. "Moving toward a Method to Test for Self Censorship by School Library Media Specialists." Research Journal of the American Association of School Librarians, vol. 5, no. 1523-4320, Dec. 2002, pp. 1-20, www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol5/SLMR_TestforSelfCensorship_V5.pdf.