

Mat-Su schools book ban goes to federal judge for oral arguments



Plaintiffs who sued the Mat-Su School District over the removal of 56 books without review (from left to right) Mitchell Clarkson, Dawn Adams, Gannon Clarkson, Northern Justice Project attorney Savannah Fletcher and Scott Adams on April 2, 2024 (Tim Rockey / Alaska Public Media)

A U.S. District Court judge heard arguments Monday on whether to grant an injunction in a lawsuit over the Matanuska-Borough School District's decision to remove 56 books from school libraries.

The American Civil Liberties Union and Northern Justice Project [sued](#) on behalf of eight plaintiffs last November, claiming that the district's removal of library books without prior review was unconstitutional, and violated the free speech rights of students. The lawsuit alleges that the district sought to suppress ideas they did not agree with, as many of the books contain LGBTQ+ or non-white characters.

Northern Justice Project attorney Savannah Fletcher represented the plaintiffs in court.

"Those books should have never been removed in the first place, and it just highlights our point, we have over 50 books still off the shelves," Fletcher said after the hearing. "If we're going to determine the majority of those were never a problem in the first place. We're denying kids years of school where they can't access these classic and new books."

The [plaintiffs filed](#) the preliminary injunction in January to have the books returned to school library shelves until the issue is resolved.

The district initially received complaints from citizens about the [56 books](#) that were removed last spring. A Library Citizens Advisory Committee was [created and hand-picked](#) by school board members to review the books for obscene content.

The district's lawyer, John Ptacin, argued that federal courts have repeatedly supported the rights of local school boards to determine what books are appropriate. Ptacin said that 13 books that were not deemed obscene had been returned to school library shelves, and argued that there was no legal precedent for what the plaintiffs were asking from Judge Sharon Gleason.

“What you’re being asked to do has never been done,” Ptacin said. “You’re being asked to put obscene materials back on the shelves.”

Ptacin declined an interview request after the hearing.

So far, the Mat-Su School Board has voted to approve the committee’s recommendation to remove three books from all school libraries: [“This Ends With Us”](#) and [“Verity”](#) by Colleen Hoover and [“Call Me By Your Name”](#) by Andre Aciman.

Judge Gleason told both parties after the hour-long hearing that she would issue a decision quickly in the case.