

Free Expression Work

Q1 – Q4 2025 (October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025) Last updated 10/1/25

Summary: *American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE) focused on educating booksellers and the public about censorship, diversity in literature, and safely creating inclusive community spaces. We were active in 34+ states tracking, influencing, or organizing to impact state legislation. We met frequently with allies, one-on-one and in coalition, to coordinate our free expression protections. ABFE had multiple virtual and in-person education events to provide free expression education to different constituencies including members and allies. A diverse range of booksellers were featured on ABFE social media. We directly supported bookstores who reached out for advice or support. And we updated our strategic plan, both short-term and long-term, in response to a transformed political landscape.*

ABA'S FREE EXPRESSION WORK (ABFE)

4th Quarter FY 2025

Summary. American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE) grew its education offerings, communications capabilities, legal strategy, and organizing capacity in response to a drastic intensification of censorship in the US, while continuing direct support for stores experiencing harassment and intimidation for their expression.

Education. ABFE's education offerings this quarter included briefing Sourcebooks staff about the role of publishers in combating book censorship, an interview with the membership of Military Families for Free Expression (including veteran-owners of bookstores), and an Instagram live with Paula Farmer. Associate Director of ABFE Philomena Polefrone also presented an education session, "Navigating Attacks on Your Store," to over 100 booksellers total at three regional bookseller association conferences.

Communications. In Q4, ABFE achieved its fiscal year goal of surpassing 2,000 followers. While posting slowed over the quarter due to travel, we focused on collaborative posts, including announcing and publicizing Libro.fm's Silent Read-In initiative, in which many ABA members are participating, and event announcements. In BTW, we kept ABA members updated about legislative activity on in-scope issues, event announcements, legal updates, and sharing opportunities for Banned Books Week collaboration opportunities with our allies. And we stayed in constant communication with coalition allies to facilitate these collaborations.

Organizing. ABFE's Associate Director continued to co-chair a legislative working group to coordinate, monitor, and develop strategy for bills across the country. Focus in Q4 was on Massachusetts, where ABFE joined the Mass Freedom to Read coalition to support the passage of a landmark freedom to read bill. We also contributed to the Banned Books Week Coalition, liaising between them and other coalitions to stay on-message and strategically aligned.

Legal. ABFE's legal strategy primarily included our ongoing lawsuits against book ban bills in Texas and Arkansas, responding to interrogatories and helping guide strategy of the briefs. We also joined amicus briefs in *NetChoice v. Fitch* and *PRH v. Robbins*, shaping strategy and supporting our coalition allies.

Direct Support. ABFE responded to numerous requests for store support this quarter, helping guide stores through protests, threats, online and in-person harassment, doxing, and vandalism. Incidents primarily centered on books and events related to global politics, and there was an uptick in targeting of LGBTQ+ bookstores in the last month of the quarter due to domestic political violence and retaliation thereto.

3rd Quarter FY 2025

Legislative Working Group co-chair. In Q3, ABFE's Associate Director continued to co-chair a coalition of leading free expression advocacy and book organizations in influencing legislation in 34+ states. This included bill monitoring and analysis; chairing meetings and creating agendas; and strategic planning to maximize coalition impact and build capacity.

Defeating censorship bills. Thanks in part to the efforts of this coalition, only one problematic bill had become law at the time of writing (SB 13 in Texas), while dozens of others failed that would have done constitutional and educational harm to children across the country. In addition, bills that would have directly impacted booksellers were killed or failed to move, including:

- **Florida.** In Florida, booksellers contributed to the failure of HB 1539, which attacked the Miller test for obscenity, a key anti-censorship safeguard.
- **Missouri.** ABFE monitored legislation and advised local activist-booksellers on strategy.
- **New Hampshire.** ABFE helped create and place an op-ed against HB 324.
- **Oklahoma.** ABFE tracked and monitored nearly a dozen bills that would have been disastrous for education, libraries, and bookstores, connecting with local bookseller-advocates; the bills failed.
- **Texas.** Booksellers were especially involved in killing Texas HB 1375, a bill that would have allowed anyone to sue commercial entities for damages if they believed a minor was harmed by "harmful to minors" materials. Thanks to bookseller testimony, organized in part by ABFE, the bill was amended and finally died without a vote. Dozens of other censorship bills failed as well.

Supporting anti-book ban legislation. ABFE helped see a number of anti-book ban bills to passage, including:

- **Colorado.** Updated Colorado booksellers and provided strategic advice regarding Colorado's anti-book ban bill, which extended public library protections passed the previous year to school libraries.

- **Oregon.** Updated Oregon booksellers about the status of Oregon's Freedom to Read Act, an anti-book ban bill that ultimately passed.
- **New York.** ABFE's Associate Director participated in an Albany lobby day in support of the New York Freedom to Read Act, which ultimately passed.
- **Rhode Island.** Advised Authors Against Book Bans's RI chapter on strategizing and raising awareness in early stages of the RI Freedom to Read Act and followed up throughout the bill's life-cycle with action alerts; the bill ultimately passed.

Education. ABFE participated in or created significant education programming in Q3.

- In April, our Associate Director participated in "Supporting Trans, Nonbinary, Intersex, and Gender-Nonconforming Staff and Community," hosted by the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (SIBA), a webinar attended by 50+ booksellers.
- In May, our Associate Director participated, with author/advocate Samira Ahmed and PEN America, in an event security webinar titled "So You're Hosting a Book Event..." about risk assessment, emergency planning, and planning events to promote community safety. Over 60 people attended.
- In June, our Associate Director presented "Knowing Your First Amendment Rights," a Children's Institute education session helping booksellers understand their rights under the US Constitution in a time when norms are being challenged politically.

Direct support for booksellers. As always, helping booksellers manage crises was the top priority for ABFE in Q3. We helped at least 8 indie bookstores with planning safe events, navigating harassment in-store and online, doxxing of employees and store owners, and educating their communities about free expression and the right to read.

1st & 2nd Quarters FY 2025

Coalition work. ABFE has strengthened our relationships with allies in free expression advocacy and the book world considerably in FY 2025 so far. Multiple meetings individually with groups such as Authors Against Book Bans, National Coalition Against Censorship, the Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA), Penguin Random House, Macmillan, Libro.fm, and Media Coalition helped coordinate our efforts with allies to make them as impactful as possible.

Associate Director of ABFE Philomena Polefrone assumed a leadership role in a newly-forming coalition of free expression advocates, shaping the strategy of the coalition, becoming co-chair of the legislative committee, and providing coordination and insight into book ban legislation going into the 2025 legislative session. This led to thrice-weekly meetings with allies and smaller working groups within this coalition. Additionally, ABFE was able to brief our international allies who are beginning to experience some censorship in the American mold.

Legislative advocacy. In Q2, ABFE was active on state legislation in 34 states. Actions included: consulting with stakeholders to influence legislation before its introduction; submitting written testimony for bills proactively resisting book bans and against bills that

would promote book bans; emailing committee members when written testimony was not an available option, advocating for or against bills on behalf of ABA member stores in the state; keeping booksellers informed with email updates on bills of concern and action items; holding briefings for booksellers and other interested parties; working with booksellers on testimony; and guiding booksellers through in-person and written testimony on bills related to free expression. ABFE was also instrumental in legislative tracking to increase organizing capacity across coalition allies and running legislative working groups to increase awareness and facilitate strategic planning.

Events and appearances. The tail end of the tour for the *Right to Read Handbook: Fighting Book Bans and Why It Matters* led to Milwaukee, where Philomena held an event at Lion's Tooth for the Handbook. ABFE was represented at the Heartland Fall Forum, where we were able to consult with booksellers across the region and understand the region's challenges. Following regional shows, Philomena appeared in online events on several occasions: an internal briefing on October 15 for Macmillan and Bloomsbury employees, appearing opposite Amanda Jones (author of *That Librarian*); an all-member briefing for Authors Against Book Bans on January 17 to talk about effectively collaborating with independent bookstores; and an online meeting for Texas booksellers on February 13. Events and appearances for the review period concluded at Wi2025 in Denver, where Philomena held two education sessions for booksellers: "Content-Based Attacks on Stores," a panel on responding to threats and harassment; and "Speak Out!: Legislative Activism 101," a workshop on preparing testimony for or against state legislation. In March, Philomena held information webinars with: Authors Against Book Bans (New York chapter), on legislation in New York and legislative advocacy strategy; and with PEN America (also featuring a speaker from EveryLibrary), on legislative advocacy.

Social media. ABFE social media continued to grow, rising to 1,482 followers. We featured representatives from: The Nonbinarian Bookstore; IBPA; Mosaics Community Bookstore & Venue; the Rutherford County (TN) Library Alliance; The Spine; Judging by the Cover; John Chrastka of EveryLibrary; Harriett's Bookshop/Ida's Bookshop; MahoganyBooks; and more. Additional popular posts included a widespread collaboration with industry allies on a statement objecting to the censorship of recent executive orders; a statement in support of the Palestinian-owned Educational Bookshop in East Jerusalem after they were raided; a post for the 2025 Trans Rights Readathon; and more.

Direct Support. ABFE provided direct support to at least 29 bookstores who reached out for help with harassment, threats, intimidation, or a request for information about fighting book bans in their area. This included stores in California, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Washington, DC. The most prevalent reasons for support included harassment due to: carrying Palestinian books; LGBTQIA2S+ books; and anti-racist books.

Strategic planning. ABFE spent a significant amount of time in strategic planning to counteract planned and active censorship from the federal government on a range of topics

threatening to impact books; equitable policies to ensure speech from a diverse range of speakers is protected at our events and on our institutional channels; our ongoing lawsuits in Texas and Arkansas; making sure booksellers are represented in coalition efforts related to free expression; and more.