



# Policy Processes in the Parental Rights in Education Act

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## Abstract

This paper examines the policy processes that went into creating and passing the Parental Rights in Education Act in Florida (HB 1557). This bill was widely known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in the media and focused primarily on the education of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. Influenced by *Littlejohn v. Leon County School Board*, the bill passed overwhelmingly through the Florida State Legislature. Using the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), this paper analyzes the policy from initial conception to implementation, including how interest groups like Moms for Liberty played a role in getting this legislation passed. Fundamentally, this legislation relied on narratives and storytelling to be successful in its implementation, though it faced backlash from wider media sources surrounding the constitutionality of the law. This paper posits that Moms for Liberty and their narrative strategies were vital to the policy process of HB 1557. Because of their connections to conservative politicians and Governor Ron DeSantis, they were able to control the narrative through most of the formulation and decision-making process, bolstering support for the bill before the media narrative fully formed. The research considers parental rights arguments and how they are gaining traction amongst school boards and educational settings, causing confusion and struggle around what kind of educational instruction is appropriate. HB 1557 has created challenges for educators and furthered the ability for parents to challenge books in the curriculum, meaning Florida is now leading the nation in book bans, and teachers have to fear lawsuits regarding what they are teaching. It also creates challenges for schools to be supportive environments for students who do not have a heteronormative experience. This research addresses these challenges and discusses the wider implications parental rights arguments may have on education.

## Keywords

Parent Rights; Public Policy; Educational Environment; Gender Issues; Social Organizations; Policy Formation

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## 1. Introduction

In 2022, the Florida state legislature and Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law House Bill 1557, otherwise known as the Parental Rights in Education Act. Later dubbed “Don’t Say Gay,” HB 1557 focused on allowing parents more control in their children’s education, including receiving mental health information and having a larger say in curriculum. A key part of this legislation, and what inspired the nickname for the bill, was the focus on sexual orientation and gender identity.

HB 1557 states: “A school district may not encourage classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students” (Florida Senate, HB 1557). As this bill has developed, it has allowed for parents to challenge any curriculum or report educators for discussing anything related to LGBTQ+ topics. The purview of the bill has also allowed for interpretation of what may be inappropriate for school-aged children, and parents in Florida have used this policy to justify further challenges to curriculum that discusses any socio-political topic, including those dealing with issues like race and class.

While there have been many scholarly articles relating to the constitutionality of the bill and the impact it has on LGBTQ+ students and educators, there is a gap in the literature regarding the policy process behind HB 1557, including the policy entrepreneurs and the impact of the policy on not only gender and sexual identity, but all social justice topics within schools.

The research questions guiding this analysis include: how have groups like Moms for Liberty used their ideological narrative to shape this legislation? What was the focus of the state legislature and other important players when formulating this policy? What were the impacts of the policy implementation across the State of Florida? This paper will focus on the policy process that HB 1557 moved through from agenda building to implementation and evaluation, and how this process has made room for further book challenges and discrimination against not only LGBTQ+ as the bill initially intended, but also against any non-white, non-heteronormative narrative. Using a narrative policy framework to understand the viewpoint of those who argued for the implementation of this law, this paper will discuss how and why a bill focused firmly on limiting both educators and students’ freedom of speech received support and passed through Florida’s state legislature.

## 2. Narrative Policy Framework and Methodology

There are multiple theories on policy processes and how they function. This paper focuses on the entirety of the process from agenda building to implementation. For this analysis, House Bill 1557 was analyzed as it went through multiple stages of revision between the Florida House and Senate. This analysis also relied heavily on the court decision from the *Littlejohn* case. I examined 43 YouTube videos posted on the Moms for Liberty channel, focusing on any that made mention of LGBTQ+ issues, gender ideology, parental rights, parental freedoms, school board challenges, interviews with media outlets like Fox News, and any video “live” that featured one or both of the founders. I also used Facebook as a touchpoint for further Moms for Liberty analysis, examining five Facebook Live videos posted referring to parental rights policies and “Don’t Say Gay” that were not included on their YouTube channel. Finally, I used twelve news sources directly discussing HB 1557, including press releases from Governor DeSantis’ website.

This analysis is aided by the concept of narrative used in policy work and within the political realm, and the material analyzed focuses on how political actors built a narrative to successfully pass the legislation. According to Jones and McBeth (2010), “A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters” (p. 329). Shanahan et al. (2018) express that “politicians, political strategies, and media reporters understand intuitively that how a story is rendered is as important to policy success and political longevity as are which actions are undertaken” (p. 173). A key part of the policy process includes how individuals, groups, and larger institutions frame their policy narratives to garner support and see their legislation pass through. Narrative was a large part of Florida’s HB 1557, especially on the meso level.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), according to Jones and McBeth (2022), applies the concept of narrative and storytelling “to the policy process, whereby narratives are meaning-making tools used to capture attention and influence policy outcomes” (p. 1). Shanahan et al. (2017) provide five core assumptions to make before applying an NPF to research. These are social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual (Shanahan et al., 2017, 2018). Social construction is the idea that the background of policy realities and conceptions is created by the society in which they exist. These social constructions are a part of a bounded reality, meaning that their variation is not random and instead is informed by belief systems and ideologies, experiencing stability over time. According to McGovern and Jones (2024),

From the earliest civilization, storytelling has played a fundamental role in establishing cultural identity, instilling moral values, communicating societal norms, and structuring the very thoughts of human beings. The ubiquity of humans as story-tellers, or Homo Narrans, highlights that stories are not merely a tool for information exchange. Instead, they serve as powerful mediums through which we forge social bonds, facilitate cooperation, and make sense of complex phenomena (p. 2).

To be able to measure data as part of an NPF means that the narrative being analyzed has specific and identifiable

structures, as well as operating at three levels: micro, meso, and macro. Finally, to be considered for NPF, “narrative is understood to play a central role in human cognition and communication” (Shanahan et al., 2017).

Narrative strategies influence the policy process. Part of a narrative is the telling of a story, with identifiable setting, characters, plot, and moral. It’s necessary to define these parameters, as well as identify the strategies used and the causal mechanisms that may “strategically arrange narrative elements to assign responsibility and blame for a policy problem” (Shanahan et al., 2018). Using HB 1557 as the focal policy for this analysis, the scope of this research will consider the meso level of NPF. It is important to acknowledge here that all three levels of analysis are important and interconnected on some level, and it is impossible to completely isolate one level for analysis. However, for the purposes of this paper, the meso level is most appropriate for data collection and analysis of HB 1557. “NPF’s meso level examination of the strategic construction and communication of policy narratives by policy actors organized in a variety of ways: charismatic individuals, groups, constellations of actors, coalitions, and so on” (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 187). Jenkins-Smith et al. (2018) points out that “subsystems contain a large set of components that interact in nontrivial ways...these components range from physical and institutional characteristics to actor attributes, including belief systems and political resources” (p.139). NPF analysis on the meso level also ties into some theories from the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) developed by Sabatier (1993), as the focus on interest groups and their effect on policy is necessary to understanding policy goals and how groups might use their resources to achieve these goals. The following section will examine the hypotheses necessary to continue this framework contextualized with the Florida policy, as well as the relevant groups and institutions that played a part in creating both the Parental Rights narrative and the “Don’t Say Gay” narrative that challenged the policy.

## 2.1 Causal Mechanism

According to Shanahan et al. (2018), causal mechanisms explain how certain factors in narrative can lead to another in public policy. These are based on research done by Stone (2012) and include four causal theories. The one most important to this research is the intentional causal mechanism, which considers that the narrative being created to push for a specific policy outcome is intentional and not inadvertent, accidental, or mechanical (Stone, 2012; Shanahan et al., 2018).

There are basic assumptions for this paper that further the point of an intentional causal mechanism that shows the process in which HB 1557 was passed was done intentionally to allow for parents to have further power against school boards and ensure they can determine that any teaching about LGBTQ+ topics or other social issues is objectionable. The methodology of using written texts, speeches, videos, and digital media to perform an analysis of the meso-level policy process will contribute to establishing causation as well. These assumptions are that the policy actors involved in HB 1557, including Florida governor Ron DeSantis, the Florida state legislature, and the social group Moms for Liberty found success using rhetorical narrative strategies, including melodramatic stories and stories of decline, to further their policy goals rather than using scientific or technical communication; as well as using thematic framing – specifically that of “parental rights” – to sway opinions in their favor and get the bill passed. A final assumption of this paper is the role that media outlets played as policy actors with HB 1557 and how they contributed toward larger policy debates, including arguments against the policy.

## 3. HB 1557

### 3.1 The Leadup: *Littlejohn*

*Littlejohn v. Leon County School Board* was a case seeking “damages to vindicate their fundamental rights to the upbringing of their children as the school district implemented a gender transition plan without their consent” (Stanley et al., 2022). The *Littlejohn* case was foundational as it allowed the courts to consider existing rulings and protections for LGBTQ+ students, as well as the extent to which parental rights may play a role inside the schools. According to Chief Judge Walker (2022) in his opinion of the case, the plaintiffs were the parents of the student who wanted to identify as gender-nonconforming and be addressed by their first initial “J” as well as “they/them”. At the time, the parents were aware of this, and

plaintiffs did not give A.G. permission to do so. After that conversation, Plaintiff January Littlejohn (“Mrs. Littlejohn”) emailed A.G.’s homeroom teacher to tell her that (i) A.G. was expressing gender confusion, (ii) Plaintiffs were seeking a private counselor for A.G., and (iii) Plaintiffs did not consent to A.G. using “J.” as a name or “they/them” pronouns, but A.G. could use “J.” as a nickname with teachers and classmates (*Littlejohn v. Sch. Bd. of Leon Cnty. Fla.*, 2022).

However, during the school year, the student in question approached a school counselor and once again requested to use different names and different pronouns. In line with the school policies on gender and sexuality inclusion, the staff at the school met with the student and came up with a support plan (*Littlejohn v. Sch. Bd. of Leon Cnty. Fla.*, 2022). Ultimately, the school board was aware of the support plan, and the plan was approved for the student. However, the parents remained unnotified due to the school allowing the decision for parental notification to be up to the student, and it was noted that parents were “aware, but unsupportive” (*Littlejohn v. Sch. Bd. of Leon Cnty. Fla.*, 2022).

Eventually, the parents became aware of the situation and requested more information, and this is likely when the parents began to bring parental rights concerns to the attention of the school,

After learning from A.G. on September 14, 2020, that A.G. met with Deerlake staff who asked about restroom preferences, Mrs. Littlejohn asked Defendant Thomas and Defendant Robin Oliveri, an assistant principal at Deerlake, about the September Meeting. *Id.* 102. Defendants Thomas and Oliveri declined to provide Mrs. Littlejohn with information about the September Meeting, stating that A.G. was “‘protected’ under a non-discrimination law that does not provide for parental notification or input” and that, “by law,” A.G. had to be the one to request Plaintiffs’ attendance at the meeting (*Littlejohn v. Sch. Bd. of Leon Cnty. Fla.*, 2022).

The parents argued that their constitutional rights under the 14th Amendment were violated, and brought their case to court under the due process clause. The opinion of Walker (2022) describes the difficulty the plaintiffs face attempting to use this argument against the school district, and eventually the case was dismissed in favor of the school. The parents’ arguments were summed up in the opinion as such:

Returning to Plaintiffs’ claims, they allege that Defendants acted with deliberate indifference to their protected liberty interests in familial privacy, directing the upbringing of A.G., and directing the medical and mental health decision-making for A.G. At its core, this is a case where Defendants allegedly (i) let A.G. voluntarily chose a preferred name and pronouns that they knew Plaintiffs didn’t agree with, (ii) didn’t seek Plaintiffs’ input regarding A.G.’s name choice, pronoun choice, or other elements of A.G.’s Support Plan, (iii) didn’t notify Plaintiffs about the September Meeting or the Support Plan because they knew Plaintiffs would not agree with A.G.’s decision, and (iv) dragged their feet in disclosing the September Meeting and Support Plan to the Plaintiffs (*Littlejohn v. Sch. Bd. of Leon Cnty. Fla.*, 2022).

While the court did not uphold the complaint made by the Littlejohn family, this argument was essential to the push for parental rights in education, and became one of the points of purpose for Moms for Liberty to further their agenda. It also provided a basis for this issue to be taken to the Florida Legislature as a way to bypass the decisions of the court and uphold that parents be notified of any matter pertaining to their children, even if the children request that the parents remain unaware.

### 3.2 Background

In 2022, the Parental Rights in Education Act passed through the Florida Senate and was signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis on March 28th. On the Governor’s website, it was stated,

Today, Governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill (HB) 1557, Parental Rights in Education, which reinforces parents’ fundamental rights to make decisions regarding the upbringing of their children. The bill prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through 3rd grade and prohibits classroom instruction that is not age appropriate for students and requires school districts to adopt procedures for notifying parents if there is a change in services from the school regarding a child’s mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being (Governor of Florida, 2022).

The same page also states that HB 1557 takes three key steps to protect students and “put power back in the hands of the parents,” which, incidentally, is exactly the phrase that right-wing group Moms for Liberty uses as they advocate for parental rights. They are key policy actors in this legislation and will be further considered as this policy process is analyzed. The three key steps that HB 1557 purports to take, according to Governor DeSantis (2022), is to prohibit instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity, ensure parents are notified about healthcare services at the school with “the right to decline any service offered,” and to ensure that whenever a questionnaire or health screening is given to students, the parents are allowed to see it first and provide permission for the school to administer it.

The bill details these steps, focusing mainly on the notion that parents deserve more say in their children’s education, specifically in regards to services offered at school outside of the classroom, especially mental health and physical health. However, the focal point of the bill became its focus on section three, where it was clearly stated that sexual orientation

and gender identity may not be taught in primary and elementary levels, and are subject to scrutiny at the secondary level. In fact, the bill states in section four, “A parent of a student may bring an action against a school district to obtain a declaratory judgment that a school district procedure or practice violates this paragraph and seek injunctive relief” (HB 1557, Florida House of Representatives).

HB 1557 was signed into law on March 28th, 2022, and went into effect on July 1st of the same year. The bill was passed in the Florida House of Representatives with a vote of 69 to 47, and in the Senate with a vote of 22 to 17 (Xie, 2022). Existing literature on this bill focuses primarily on the constitutionality of the policy, however, there is little literature examining the policy process and narrative settings behind it. The following sections will consider the process behind HB 1557 and examine how these processes helped the actors involved to build a comprehensive narrative to meet their policy goals.

#### 4. Interests and Agenda Setting

Interests, according to Stone (2012), are “people and organizations who have a stake in an issue or are affected by it” (p. 229). On the meso level of NPF, the most important actors are groups, coalitions, and organizations. This is important to the existing interests and the overall agenda building of the bill, as if there are shared problems between a group that furthers their interest in mobilization, there is a higher likelihood of pursuing and obtaining policy changes (Stone, 2012). Some of the key characters/policy actors that were involved in the process of HB 1557 were the Florida State Legislature, Governor Ron DeSantis, the group Moms for Liberty, including their cofounder Tiffany Justice, school boards, and, of course, both educators and students in schools across Florida. It is also important to understand the setting in which this policy process took place, as it came to fruition during the later years of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as after Donald Trump had lost his bid for a second term of presidency and the United States witnessed the January 6th insurrection.

These relevant events played a role in the agenda-setting process because it is generally difficult to get an issue to the forefront of the agenda and have it be voted on (Birkland, 2017). Moms for Liberty, founded in 2021, already had gained a substantial amount of power in Florida and among the right-wing, as they had initially come out as strongly right-wing and were able to make connections with political elites (Moms for Liberty, 2021). Their initial arguments centered on parental rights and the notion that children were being subjected to inappropriate material through the school curriculum and school libraries (Moms for Liberty Cofounder Live, YouTube, 2021). In fact, Moms for Liberty members were already beginning to show up to school board meetings and advocating for the banning of books. This gave them the power to push for further legislation change, and ensured they had a voice in HB 1557, and may explain the sections that push for parents to be able to challenge decisions and bring actions against the school (Moms for Liberty Facebook, 2022).

Moms for Liberty uses their website to further their narrative and their policy goals. They refer to themselves as “joyful warriors” who “stand for truth... build relationships... and empower others” (Moms for Liberty, 2021). The website also provides a “for parents” page that has resources for members to access and learn more information about their goals. They include a “current issues” section that has titles of what they are actively working on: sex education, critical race theory, data collection, gender ideology, school choice, restorative justice, and books (Moms for Liberty, accessed 2024). The website also has a parent pledge that reads:

I pledge to honor the fundamental rights of parents including, but not limited to the right to direct the education, medical care, and moral upbringing of their children. I pledge to advance policies that strengthen parental involvement and decision-making, increase transparency, defend against government overreach, and secure parental rights at all levels of government (Moms for Liberty, 2024).

The ways in which Moms for Liberty shapes their arguments, including the idea of “moral upbringing” and “increasing transparency” rely on melodramatic ideas that the schools are actively working against parents to instill progressive values into children, rather than schools being a place of education and opportunity for self-expression. Moms for Liberty is clear in their beliefs that gender ideology and sexual orientation are harmful for students to know, however, they are not clear on the how or why of what is harmful or immoral. When working on challenging books, Moms for Liberty’s main strategy is to find books that have sexually explicit passages and read them at school board meetings out of context to the overarching theme or story of the book. The focus on this strategy is likely a way for parents to point to the “decline” of education, and speaks to hypothesis one of this paper, in that the main focus to promote the policy goals of HB 1557 is to paint pictures of immorality and decline in schools and the need for parents to be more actively involved in their children’s education.

Moms for Liberty has continued using these strategies and connecting with right-wing legislators and organizations, including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. DeSantis has been a presence among Moms for Liberty conferences and conventions, and even appointed Moms for Liberty co-founder to the Florida Commission on Ethics (Moms for Liberty,

2025). The ties between DeSantis and Moms for Liberty are likely one reason that the interest group was so successful in mobilizing for HB 1557 and can continue its campaign against freedom of education. “Its strategy is to take over school boards and label dissenting teachers, librarians, and parents ‘groomers.’ ... The Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled Moms for Liberty an extremist group” (Liu, 2023). The organization has made public attempts to distance itself from this narrative and be seen solely as a parental rights group, but the continued attempts at censorship in schools and legislation changes show that attempts at rebranding are ineffective.

## 5. Policy Formulation

The policy formulation behind HB 1557 is not necessarily new. There have been many anti-LGBTQ+ laws passed across the United States, and some focus heavily on education and parental rights. In fact, many of these bills, as Lester (2024) points out, focus mainly on the idea of “protecting children”, but the policies themselves target the ability for children in school to exercise their right to free speech and self-expression.

HB 1557 was a result of lawsuits in Leon County in 2021 (Stanley et al., 2022). The *Littlejohn* lawsuit paved the way for policy actors like Moms for Liberty to continue their fight for parental rights and achieve their policy goals. Because of the nature of the lawsuit focusing on gender identity and a transition plan being put into place without consent, Moms for Liberty was able to argue that notification to parents from the school when children receive care surrounding mental health issues or physical health issues. In fact, Moms for Liberty was personally connected to this case, and in a Facebook live from 2022, cofounder Tiffany Justice states, “A dear friend of ours, January Littlejohn, comes on the podcast.... January’s daughter was put into a gender transition program without the parents’ consent or knowledge.... This was happening behind the parents back” (Moms for Liberty Facebook, 2022).

Because of the predominantly Republican state legislature, these arguments were heard and furthered in both the House and Senate. The bill, as presented, included language lifted directly from the lawsuit, indicating that *Littlejohn* had a profound impact on the bill despite the ruling of the court. The bill was brought forward by Representative Joe Harding, who served in the Florida House of Representatives from 2020 through 2022, after which he resigned and was later sentenced to four months in prison for wire fraud, money laundering, and false statements (USAO-NDFL, 2023). The bill was co-sponsored by Representative Dennis Baxley, who has served in the House from 2016-2024 and identifies as a conservative Republican who serves on the foundations of “Family, Freedom, and Faith” (DennisBaxley.com, accessed 2024). There were multiple analyses of the bill from House and Senate committees. While the bill went through many edits and variations, the analyses show the overall support of the bill. One analysis by the Senate Committee of Appropriations states that the bill “specifies how a parent’s fundamental right to make decisions regarding the care and upbringing of his or her child must be addressed in the public school setting” (Florida Senate Committee of Appropriations, 2022). This analysis goes on to discuss the constitutional right of parents, stating “It is well settled that the interest of parents in the care, custody, and control of their children is perhaps the oldest of the recognized fundamental liberty interests protected by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution” (Florida Senate Committee of Appropriations, 2022). The analysis found no other constitutional issues and did not mention the constitutional rights that children may have for freedom of speech or freedom of self-expression. There was also no mention of how this bill may impact educators and their ability to properly teach their classes.

## 6. Decision Making

HB 1557 primarily used issue framing to try to obtain a wider reach and get more support (Stone, 2012). While Republicans and interested groups framed it as a problem of parental rights, when the bill was passed and began to circulate among media, it quickly sparked controversy and was dubbed “Don’t Say Gay” (Klein, 2024; Lester, 2024; Rosky, 2022). In the Polis model of decision-making analysis, “policy actors state their goals ambiguously and possibly keep some goals secret or hidden” (Stone, 2012). With HB 1557, Moms for Liberty discussed the bill and would explicitly say “The bill was given the nickname the Don’t Say Gay bill, but nowhere in the bill does it say the word gay or say that you can’t say gay... we have parents who are gay that are members of Moms for Liberty” (Moms for Liberty Facebook, 2022). Tiffany Justice used Facebook lives and the Moms for Liberty podcast and website to spin the narrative of parental rights as being the main focus of the bill, and denied that the bill had anything to do with being gay, despite the bill specifically speaking to disallowing discussion of sexual or gender identity. The decision to redefine or obscure policy goals of the parental rights act likely was to garner more support and keep the goals ambiguous, however the fact that this bill followed a lawsuit regarding gender identity and transition shows that the focus was clearly to avoid any teachings or discussion of sexual or gender identity that is not heteronormative. According to Stone (2012), “Any viable policy plan has to grow from analysis deeply attuned to the realities of the polis. And once a policy plan reaches the point of becoming an official decision, it is still not out of the polis” (p. 268). The process to pass HB 1557 was mainly focused on the interests of the

groups involved, including Moms for Liberty and the Republican lawmakers who were working on passing it. They ensured that while the policy was still being formulated and decisions were being made, the focus was on the parental rights issues and not on the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. However, as the decision to pass the policy was made and the media began to report on it, implementation saw more discursive commentary and pushback from the general public.

## 7. Implementation and Evaluation

While HB 1557 was passed through the Florida legislature with support from interest groups like Moms for Liberty, the reception by the general public and mass media was less favorable. The implementation process of this bill saw a paradox in the conception of rights – whether parents had rights to make overarching decisions for their children and their education, or whether students under the age of eighteen have fundamental rights per the United States Constitution. As Pelman and Lynch (2011) state, “students have received their most powerful lessons regarding the First Amendment of the United States Constitution by standing up for their right to receive information and ideas” (p. 1). There has been legal precedence in regards to students’ Constitutional rights in cases *School Board, Island Tree School District v. Pico in 1976*, where school officials removed a number of books without due process and students argued it violated their First Amendment rights (Pelman & Lynch, 2011; Anderson, 2023). In this case, the students were granted that protection and the right to “send and receive ideas in the school setting” (Shearer, 2022). Another important case included *Tinker v. Des Moines*, where students were suspended for protesting the Vietnam War and sued the school in retaliation as they felt their freedom of speech rights had been violated (Pelman & Lynch, 2011; Swindler, 1993). The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students, and this case helped set a precedent for the notion that students had fundamental Constitutional rights to the First Amendment.

Lawsuits in Florida in response to HB 1557 have been varied and have not set a precedent on the policy and the way in which the policy has been enacted. Moms for Liberty has taken advantage of the terms of the policy to continue going to school boards and fighting to have the curriculum changed and books removed. However, once news that HB 1557 was moving through the state legislature, news outlets began reporting on the “Don’t Say Gay” policy, officially providing the most popular moniker for the policy (Yurcaba, 2023). According to Johnson (2020), “the bill faced instant criticism and disapproval...A poll from the Public Opinion Research Lab at the University of North Florida found that only 40% of Floridians supported the bill” (p. 1). Izaguirre (2022) detailed the response from Republicans in Florida in which they described the measure as “reasonable” and suggested that “parents, not teachers, should be broaching subjects of sexual orientation and gender identity with their children.” As the bill continued to move through the legislature, there was backlash from celebrities, as well as staged protests across Florida schools (Izaguirre, 2022). One of the main criticisms from Democrats and opponents of the bill was that the language of the policy was intentionally vague and could be interpreted so broadly that teachers would simply avoid the subjects entirely so as not to face backlash from parents (Izaguirre, 2022; Wamsley, 2022).

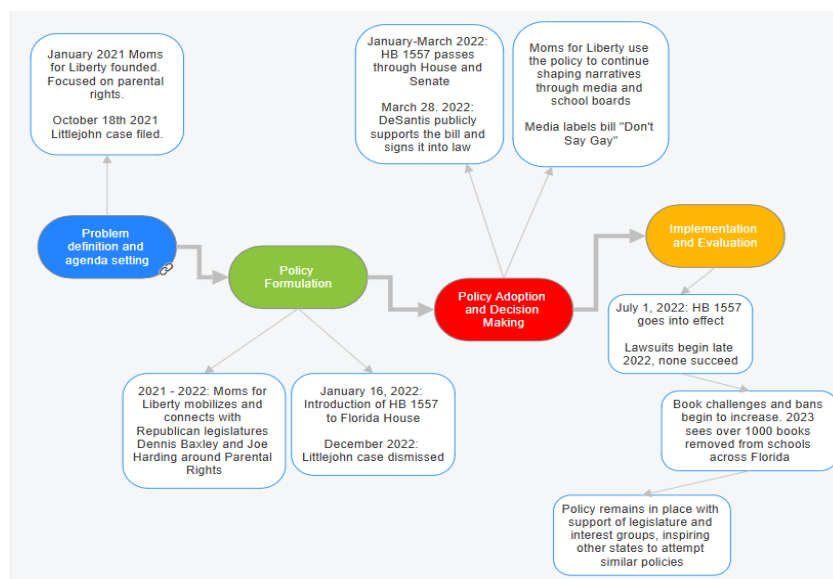


Figure 1. Policy Processes Flowchart.

Figure 1 maps a timeline of the relevant policy processes and the key dates, events, interest group mobilization, and media spikes that drove critical narrative strategies throughout the formulation and implementation of HB 1557.

## 8. Book Banning and Social Justice

Following the creation of Moms for Liberty in 2021 and the passing of HB 1557 in 2022, Florida school districts “removed approximately 300 books from library shelves” (Lavietes, 2023). The Miami Herald (2023) suggested that Florida has removed over 1000 books from their schools and is currently leading the nation in book bans, surpassing Texas with double the book bans (Tallahassee Democrat, 2023). The vaguely worded legislation of HB 1557 has increased the number of book challenges happening across Florida school districts, as well as “pushes by local and national advocacy groups as some of the reasons for the increased book bans” (Miami Herald, 2023). As books are challenged, it has become more apparent that the topics that these books cover are those that relate not only to the LGBTQ+ experience, but also race, social justice, and discrimination. Shearer (2022) states,

A bill in Iowa seeks to criminalize the dissemination of “material a person knows or reasonably should know, is obscene or harmful to minors” in K-12 public schools or libraries with two years of jail time. A Texas Representative has distributed a list of 850 books statewide that he believes could “make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex.” And parents nationwide are submitting formal paperwork to school administrators challenging the appropriateness of books dealing with race, social justice, and discrimination, arguing that these books promote terrorism (p. 25).

Attempts to limit diversity among students may also be an attempt to limit their worldview. In right-leaning states, it may also be of interest to those in power, as the curriculum only covers the topics of interest to those in power. Anantha-krishnan et al. (2023) furthers the idea that book banning is of interest to public officials and as a political tactic by confirming “since 2021 there has been a significant push from state officials, elected representatives, individual parents, community members, and advocacy groups to remove books construed to deal with sensitive topics such as race and gender from public and school libraries” (p. 1). While book banning is not necessarily a new phenomenon, the push to ban books that focus on relevant social justice issues rather than focusing on what may be outdated information or the need to update the curriculum.

Anderson (2023) demonstrates that “the use of educational suitability and pervasive vulgarity as justifications for the removal of these texts demonstrates the prioritization of white, straight, cisgender, and Western culture and values in American public schools” (p. 13). Shearer (2022) also covers this, “current book ban efforts led by conservative groups primarily target works that deal with race, racial injustice, and the critical race movement and that are often written by minority authors” (p. 26). Schools are primarily sites of knowledge, where students attend to understand not only the core curriculum, but to understand the culture and society they live in as well as the history of their country. Because students spend such a large portion of their young lives in a school setting, it is also where they begin to understand who they are and their place in the world. When books that tell diverse stories are challenged and banned by fearful parents, it stunts the ability for students to diversify their perspectives. Anderson (2023) states that “the ostensibly ‘neutral’ values like academic merit or educational values are a way of rationalizing the continued oppression of BIPOC communities” (p. 15).

Shearer (2022) follows these arguments, positing that “the Constitution has historically been interpreted to serve the majority population” (p.42). School boards and school districts primarily value their community and the opinions of their community. Perhaps this is due to the fact that they are elected to serve, and therefore must remain in the good graces of the community. This creates problems when a community holds certain social, political, or moral beliefs that may contradict a well-rounded education. “The special characteristics of schools, which involve inculcating the community values to students, lend administrators broad discretion to prohibit certain modes of expression” (Anderson, 2023, p. 16). Anderson (2023) further develops this point extensively in the case for how the First Amendment should give rights to students to learn:

The imposition of ambiguous “community values” as a baseline for determining whether or not a work contains “pervasive vulgarity” permits dominant groups to impose restrictions on those without power. In particular, the use of white cultural values as the norm when considering vulgarity inevitably leads to the silencing of BIPOC voices and the erasure of representation. The use of an allegedly “color-blind” standard, such as “community values’ ultimately represses and renders irrelevant the ways in which race shapes social relationships and ignores the cultural context around “vulgarity” that can affect its meaning in different circumstances (p. 17).

When the books that are being banned are primarily focused on the experience of non-white or queer stories, it makes



the assumption that there is something vulgar to being outside of a white, heteronormative standard. This is dangerous to instill in children's education, and serves the purpose of furthering white supremacy and keeping white, heteronormative ideals in power. This results in "a curious mix of democratic government and egalitarian values along with state repression, mob violence, and an ideology, justified by religion and science, of the eternal inequality of humanity" (Olson, 2004; p. 42). Anderson (2023) describes the importance of allowing students access to diverse texts: "student access to diverse texts in the school library can function as a preliminary step to deconstructing oppression and reclaiming liberty" (p. 23).

## 9. Effects on Educators

HB 1557 and the following consequences of book challenges and book banning set a dangerous precedent for educators. There are already vetting processes through libraries and school curriculum to process books and establish what books are successful in a school. Educators now have to focus on whether anything they say can be grounds for a lawsuit (Gamboa, 2022). This is especially difficult for educators and school personnel who identify as LGBTQ+, as they may feel targeted by the policy and unable to speak at all about their own orientation and identity. Such actions as simple as having a pride flag in their classroom can open them up to lawsuits and discrimination. "For example, a history teacher could assign independent research assignments to his students and let them choose a past or present event to report on, but if a student highlights an LGBTQ civil rights event or LGBTQ public figure the teacher could then be sued, disciplined, or fired" (Gamboa, 2022). It is challenging for educators to do the job they are qualified to do when they are being policed by concepts of parental rights. These parental rights arguments also aid in growing mistrust of educators and the idea that a parent – often someone who has never had formal education training – knows better than the school they are choosing to send their children to. This mistrust also goes the other way, as teachers are fearful of retaliation, and therefore hesitant to teach anything that could be misconstrued as inappropriate. It sows mistrust and resentment between educators and parents, which is not in the best interest of the children being taught, as it puts their education at risk. HB 1557 and other policies implemented like it are rooted in narratives that parents have a right to know what is happening with their children at school and that school officials are actively working to keep that information away from them. More realistically, schools are operating in the best interest of their students and the education of their students, and work to keep the parents in the loop where necessary. This policy, rather than encouraging more communication between educators and parents, instead encourages teachers to censor a large portion of their curriculum and work against forming connections with their students or encouraging freedom of speech or self-expression.

## 10. Implications and Conclusion

This paper has covered the narrative behind HB 1557 in Florida, and how the policy process has resulted in increased book banning and lowered diversity and inclusivity. A conservative, right-leaning narrative was successfully used by the relevant policy actors, Moms for Liberty and conservative legislators, to garner more political support and further the policy goal of restricting education on sexual orientation and gender identity. The policy goal was achieved, but as it moved through the legislature and received media attention, there was varied media reporting, and "Don't Say Gay" quickly became the primary name the bill was recognized. This analysis effectively demonstrates how narrative influences policy processes and allows for the mobilization of parental rights arguments to become a legislative and educational priority.

The implications of this policy are likely to continue being discovered as other conservative states use similar strategies to restrict education on sexual orientation and gender ideology. According to Migdon and Simon (2022), at least fifteen other states have passed or attempted to pass similar bills, including Tennessee, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Kansas. Penderharkar (2023) expands this list, saying that Florida's "Don't Say Gay" has inspired twenty-two other states to restrict education surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity. This paper's findings suggest that narrative is a powerful tool in the policy arena, and as similar legislation continues to appear throughout the United States, many states will likely face lawsuits regarding both the instruction of these topics, similar to *Littlejohn*, as well as challenges to the legislation and student's rights to free speech, as in *Pico*.

This research used existing literature and digital media to progress its arguments, however, it is important to note that the NPF framework could be expanded. Further research could use more quantitative methods, as well as expand on all micro, meso, and macro levels of policy processes. Parental rights policies and narratives are becoming increasingly popular as policy goals. This research is important to understanding the policy atmosphere of right-leaning states in a post-pandemic, Trumpian political climate. This research can serve as a touchpoint for future analysis into the long-term effects of legislation like HB 1557, the efficacy of interest groups in policy processes, and the overall usefulness of narrative strategy in mobilizing support for a challenging policy goal. It is also useful to educational research, as the

growing mistrust in educators and the attempts to diminish curriculum will lead to further challenges in educating the children of the United States, and further research may determine the impact of restricting freedom of expression in students using these policies.

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