



SEPTEMBER 2025 | ISSUE 23

# Public Policy News

A monthly dispatch from the AAUW California Public Policy Team

## FACING THE YEAR AHEAD WITH STRENGTH AND PURPOSE

Welcome to those of you who are new to your positions this year, and welcome back to those who are continuing. We are looking forward to another year of working together with you to advocate for gender equity and social justice. As we kick off the new year, we are faced with many new challenges, including an off-year election in which Californians will be asked to vote on Proposition 50 which approves redistricting efforts for the next election cycles until maps are redrawn in 2030. We will discuss Prop 50 in more detail in the October issue of Public Policy News. Our commitment to preserving democracy is unwavering, and we are grateful to have you as a partner in this fight.

In Solidarity,  
Missy and Amy

## LEG AGENDA UPDATE

Legislative session closes soon!

Many of the bills on our 2025 Legislative Agenda, including our top 3 bills AB 1098, SB 771 and SB 418, are expected to reach the Governor's desk in early September. While we are still occasionally activating the email action alerts, we will be posting the most pressing alerts on our socials, so **please look for Action Alerts via Resistbot and BlueSky for opportunities to request the Governor's support.**

## PEER GROUP MEETINGS 25-26

Not a public policy chair? No problem! Join us.

We are so excited to see you on Thursday, September 4<sup>th</sup> at 3pm Pacific for our kickoff Public Policy Peer group meeting. **We originally created the meeting for Branch Public Policy Chairs, but we want to make clear that anyone and everyone who is interested in public policy is welcome to join!** All meetings are recorded, so you can view them later. However, if you are planning to come to live meetings, please note that, beginning in October 2025, we are shifting to FRIDAYS at 1:30pm PT.

All information about these meetings: zoom link, slides, recordings, agendas--literally EVERYTHING--can be found **HERE**.

## BRANCH PUBLIC POLICY CHAIRS' MEETING

### KICKOFF MEETING

Thursday Sep 4, 2025  
at 3:00pm Pacific  
**ZOOM LINK HERE**



Click **HERE** for meeting information.



**Peer Group Meetings from October will be moved to Fridays at 1:30pm.**

2025-2026 Meetings:  
Fri Oct 10 at 1:30pm  
Fri Dec 5 at 1:30pm  
Fri Feb 6 at 1:30pm  
Fri Apr 3 at 1:30pm  
Fri Jun 5 at 1:30pm

## SIGN UP FOR ACTION ALERTS HERE.

## WHERE IS THAT?

Key links to your public policy resources:

- [Google Workspace](#)
- [Branch liaisons](#)
- Contact us at [publicpolicy@aaupw.ca.org](mailto:publicpolicy@aaupw.ca.org)
- Tell us about your branch public policy events by filling out this [form](#).

click here!

**2025  
Bill Tracker**

# Three Steps to Take Action in September

Focus: Fight For Pluralistic Democracy, Fight For Public Education



Taking action is as easy as 1-2-3! Each month we provide you with a short list of targeted action-items focused on a topic-area that we care about. This month our focus is on PUBLIC EDUCATION.

If you want more options for action, please visit the [AAUW California public policy website](#), stop by our peer group meetings, or visit the [Take Action!](#) spreadsheet (soon-to-be website for easier navigation).

## Take Action: Equity & Access in Public Education

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### STEP 1: Self-Focused: Education



- learn more about the important role that free and equitable access to public education has played in maintaining a functional democracy in the United States on p.4
- learn more about the AAUW CA PP School Board Project and how you can get involved by clicking [HERE](#) (and/or on the links at the bottom of this page)
- learn more about how [some pressure](#) to (re)fund education access has been impactful by reading the linked article and the update on p.3

2

### STEP 2: Other-Focused: Education & Connection



- tell a few people (2-10) something about the important role that public education, in general, and school boards in particular play in maintaining a functional democracy
- tell a few people (2-10) something that THEY can do to ensure that school boards in California are contributing to, not detracting from, the norms of a pluralistic democracy

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### STEP 3: Politically-Focused: Outreach to Legislators



- Sign [THIS](#) Resistbot petition to push federal representatives to rethink their funding choices around federal public education. You can also call your federal representatives and use this petition as a script.
- Respond to our upcoming action alerts for AAUW California's "A" priority bill, CA AB 1098, which expands educational access and success for pregnant students



# The School Board Project Enters A New Phase

Is Your School Board is Complying With California Law?

As we shared in Spring 2025, the AAUW California School Board Project has entered a new phase in which we encourage members to monitor and observe their local school boards to ensure they are complying with California law. For those who missed the training, find the recording as well as other information and resources [HERE](#).

In early 2026, the School Board Project (SBP) team will host a Half-Day Symposium (delayed from the previously announced date of Sept '25). In each issue of this newsletter leading up to the symposium, the team will share an article on the current attacks on public education and the importance of meeting them at the school board level. This month's article can be found on page 4.

## Upcoming Education-Focused Events:

Public School Defenders Hub Monitors & Observers - Brown Act Specific Training: Sept 25, 2025 6:30-8:30pm. **Register [HERE](#)**

AAUW Washington Online Branch Program on Title IX: **Sept 17, 2025 5:30-7:00pm via Zoom**. **Register [HERE](#)**.

AAUW Silicon Valley Branch Program on Higher Education at Risk - And How You Can Help Protect It - featuring Meghan Kissell, AAUW Senior Director of Policy: **Dec 3, 2025 4:00-5:00pm. SAVE THE DATE - registration link coming soon.**

## Upcoming Events

### Mark Your Calendars!

Saint Mary's College of California NEW (New Education for Women's) Leadership Institute on-day conference "[Women's Leadership in the Current Political Moment](#)" **Sept 4, 2025, 9:50am-5:30pm**

AAUW LACIC [September program](#) on Generative AI and its impact on education, health and mental health. **Sept 14, 2025 2:00-4:00pm** via Zoom link [HERE](#).

AAUW Washington Online Branch Program on Title IX. **Sept 17, 2025 5:30-7:00pm** via Zoom. Register [HERE](#).

The Challenges to Voting Rights Then and Now by LWV. **Sept 18, 2025 1:00-2:30pm** via Zoom. Register [HERE](#).

Public School Defenders Hub Monitors & Observers - Brown Act Specific Training: **Sept 25, 2025 6:30-8:30pm**. Register [HERE](#)

AAUW California Webinar - Harnessing the Power of AI. **Nov 1, 2025 10:00-11:30am**. **SAVE THE DATE** - registration link coming soon.

AAUW Silicon Valley Branch Program on Higher Education at Risk - And How You Can Help Protect It - featuring Meghan Kissell, AAUW Senior Director of Policy. **Dec 3, 2025 4:00-5:00pm**. **SAVE THE DATE** - registration link coming soon.

## A Big Win for Public Education

An August Update from Meghan Kissel, AAUW National

On August 14, 2025 a federal judge delivered a major legal victory for public education and civil rights. In *American Federation of Teachers et al. v. U.S. Department of Education et al.*, the court struck down the Trump-Vance administration's attempt to force schools nationwide to censor lessons, eliminate diversity and inclusion programs, and sign unlawful compliance certifications under threat of losing federal funding and facing criminal penalties.

Judge Stephanie A. Gallagher ruled that both the administration's February 14 "Dear Colleague Letter" and its mandatory certification violated the Constitution and the Administrative Procedures Act, stating: "Plaintiffs have shown that neither challenged agency action was promulgated in accordance with the procedural requirements of the APA, and that both actions run afoul of important constitutional rights."

**This decision vacates both policies, protecting the ability of educators to teach honest history, support students, and foster inclusive learning environments.**

In March, AAUW joined a coalition letter to the Department of Education urging the rescission of the February 14, 2025, "Dear Colleague" letter. In April, we joined a letter to Elementary and Secondary Education Leaders urging continued investment in programs that lawfully advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

If you would like to uplift the ruling, you can find Democracy Forward's press release available [here](#).

# Understand the Urgency of Branch Participation in the School Board Project

By Seena Trigas, Member AAUW California Public Policy School Board Project



The constant noises that surround us today has had the effect on many of us wanting to “shut the door” and withdraw behind a protective shield. This is not an option if we want to protect our democracy and the rights declared in our Constitution.

**We must continue to protest against national policies that threaten our basic core principles, and take a stand at the state and local levels where we can have even greater impact. AAUW California’s mission and public policies are being threatened, and we will not stand by and allow this to happen.**

The articles that follow in our monthly AAUW California reports will present the specific violations of protected rights implemented by federal policies and local school boards throughout our state. Let’s start with a brief historical overview on the importance of our free public school system and the important role it plays in preserving our democracy.

Colonial America began the journey in Massachusetts Bay (1635) with the founding of the Boston Latin School, initially to promote the Puritan faith. Dame Schools providing reading skills for younger children were also established, and a Massachusetts law in 1647 demanded that every town comprising 50 or more families must provide a teacher to instruct on reading and writing.

Our new nation began its journey into public education with the Land Ordinance 1785/NW Ordinance 1787 providing that the new western territories be allotted land for public school purposes. The founding fathers clearly connected the role of education in protecting our democratic republic. Thomas Jefferson proposed a system of broad, free, public education and strongly believed that “in order for a society to be self-governed, it had to be educated and free thinking.” He saw the role of education as one giving “every citizen the information he needs...to understand his duties to his neighbors and country...to know his rights.”

During the 1830s, in the era of Jacksonian Democracy, focus was on the common man achieving the vote (dropping property requirements or paying taxes); our nation witnessed the beginning of a new era in public education espousing that an informed citizenry is essential for democratic participation and the health of the republic. A key focus was on the large number of immigrants coming to our shores; we needed to instill common values in all children to prepare them for their roles within our society. It’s at this time that Thomas Mann (Massachusetts) will lead the nation in the Common School Movement, a driving force resulting in widespread free public education.

**These hard-fought gains are under attack and it begins with local elections for school board members. Organizations with money are backing candidates who are attempting to restrict student rights and censor the curriculum/books available that would provide factual, open discourse. These efforts will have the exact opposite effect from the intentions of our forebears: a generation of children exposed to limited information and unprepared to engage in critical thinking necessary to fully realize the American experiment in democracy.**

Please watch for future articles that will describe how the Public Policy School Board Project is fighting back. Our advocacy and commitment to our public schools is critical, with a great deal at stake. Jefferson will end this discussion:

**“...Only educated citizens could make the American experiment in self-government succeed.”**



# Anti-LGBTQ+ Supreme Court Decision Will Likely Impact K-12 Education in California

By Missy Maceyko, Co-chair AAUW California Public Policy Committee



During LGBTQ+ pride month, a decision was issued in Mahmoud v. Taylor, a case involving the LGBTQ+ community that was heard by the Supreme Court of the United States during the 2024-2025 term.

**The outcome of this case may have an impact on the important legislative and on-the-ground work that AAUW California has been doing (via the School Board Project (SBP)) to protect historically accurate, diverse, and inclusive curricula in K-12 education and schools given the likely increase in legal opt-out requests by some parents.**

The Mahmoud case began in 2022, when the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) Board, in Maryland, updated their curriculum with more diverse and inclusive storybooks, working with childhood development experts to select books across the curriculum that would have common childhood themes but a wider array of characters, to make sure all students could see themselves in some of the texts. This included adding a handful of story books with LGBTQ+ characters.

In response to the addition of the LGBTQ+ story books, a coalition of Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Ukrainian Orthodox parents asked for an opt-out provision for any storybooks that included a normative portrayal of LGBTQ+ families, such as Pride Puppy, a rhyming alphabet book that tells the story of a family having a fun day together at a LGBTQ+ pride event, and Uncle Bobby's Wedding, a classic children's book about how to address the anxiety that children feel when their family grows and changes, in this case through marriage.

While the MCPS school board initially tried to accommodate opt-out requests that arose from parents, the school board received such an influx of requests that course administration became unmanageable. Opt-out policies are expensive, costly for students, schools, and taxpayers. This means that mass opt-outs can put further stress on already stressed logistical systems within financially burdened school districts.

**On top of the logistical and actual costs and administrative struggles created by the mass opt-out requests, the MCPS school board in this case also noted that the influx of requests fundamentally "undermined the schools' educational obligations toward inclusion, equity, and respect."**

Opt-outs can hurt kids whose lives and families are mirrored in the books, in this case explicitly positioning LGBTQ+ families' experiences as something potentially problematic and harmful to others. It also teaches young people that they can opt out of teachings that encourage being decent to all humans, even those who do not look, think, act, or love in the way that their families do. Lack of access to and understanding of diverse experiences and viewpoints and the inability to engage meaningfully with widespread inclusivity also leaves the opted-out students themselves less well-equipped to move forward to function in a diverse world, a pluralistic democracy, and a global workforce.

After the first year of implementation, MCPS school board ended the opt-out request option.

# Anti-LGBTQ+ Supreme Court Decision Will Likely Impact K-12 Education in California, con.

In response, the parents in the Mahmoud case filed a lawsuit, arguing that requiring their children to engage with story books like *Pride Puppy* and *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, whether independently or via neutral reading lessons created around them, would be a violation of their religious beliefs. Specifically, these parents claimed that lack of an opt-out provision, providing them with the ability to opt their children out of these lessons, was a violation of their First Amendment rights to freely exercise their religion, impeding their ability to instruct their children on faith-based issues related to gender and sexuality and to control when and how these issues are introduced.

Based on a 2008 case in Massachusetts, there was precedent for ruling against these kinds of opt outs because participation in public school instruction that simply exposes a child to ideas that conflict with the religious beliefs of their parents, “does not inhibit the parent from instructing the child differently.” However, on June 27, 2025, the majority of the Supreme Court broke with this precedent, deciding the case in favor of these parents’ and upholding their constitutional right to make these opt-out requests on religious grounds. The majority decision in the case called parents’ inability to opt their children out of story books like *Pride Puppy* and *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* a “substantial interference” with the religious development of their children as the books and instruction around them were deemed “coercive.”



As such, the ruling gives a great deal of latitude to parents who want to claim a religious exemption from existing public school curricula. This means that we will likely see not only an uptick in opt-out requests for LGBTQ+ material on religious grounds throughout the country, but also an uptick in requests for opt-outs on other topics that parents mark as potentially problematic. Echoing some of these concerns, Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Justice Elana Kagan gave voice to this issue during oral arguments as well as in their dissent in the case, noting the potentially broad scope of the parents’ position. Historically, Sotomayor and Kagen note, there have also been objections to “biographical material about women who have been recognized for achievement outside their home,” as well as books featuring divorce, interfaith marriage, and immodest dress.

**Because this was a federal decision, the ruling in Mahmoud will likely have an impact on public school curricula and administration in California, as well.**

Parents in California already have the ability to opt their children out of some material, perhaps most notably around comprehensive sexual health education. However, these opt-out provisions are limited in scope. As the protection and expansion of historically accurate, diverse, and inclusive curricula in K-12 education in California has been an important focus for both AAUW CA’s School Board Project and our legislative priorities, we need to watch how the decision in Mahmoud may spark expanded opt-out requests on religious grounds. While protections for inclusive curricula remain in place in California, the outcome in favor of the parents in this case is likely to create a wave of costly social and legal challenges, including a call for more expansive opt-out policies, which will have an impact on how we continue to engage in meaningful work around this priority area in the future. A possible outcome of this is that many districts will pull back on their DEI materials, setting up a potential collision course with existing CA laws.