

Darren Laustsen

Testimony

Hi my name is Darren Laustsen. I am a parent of two young girls and we live in Upper Bucks County PA.

Our local high school has a 15-year tradition of celebrating the freedom to read during Banned Book Week. Or should I say, we **had** that tradition. Last year it all ended abruptly.

Halfway through Banned Book Week in 2022, the high school librarians were instructed by the administration to take down the posters, the book display, and stop the festivities. Banned Book Week was banned in our school district.

It was an eerie foreshadowing of the events to come.

On September 27th, 2022 the Penridge School Board adopted a new library policy written by Harrisburg lobbyists from the PA Family Council.

That evening, our Board members insisted that we needed **them** to protect **our** kids from books. They claimed that “smut, filth, and pornography” existed in our school libraries. I kid you not, those are the **actual** words that they used to describe library books.

What was never mentioned that night was, specifically, which “x-rated” titles the school board was even referring to. Nonetheless, the situation was apparently dire-enough to justify pushing a policy through ahead of schedule.

At around that same time, books started disappearing from our high school library shelves. The public was not even notified about what was happening. It involved all the same titles being targeted across the nation by groups like Moms for Liberty.

It started with all 9 copies of Looking for Alaska by John Green, and all 3 copies of Sold by Patricia McCormick, Allegedly by Tiffany D Jackson, the Perks of Being a wallflower by Stephen Chobsky, Out of Darkness by Ashley Perez, the Haters by Jesse Andrews, Push by Sapphire, and even Beloved by Toni Morrison; a Pulitzer Prize winning work of literature written by a Nobel prize winning author.

Apparently, this was the *porn* that our School Board needed to ban: Award winning books that have been in the school library for 5, 10, 20, even 30 years. The same books we used to celebrate every single year during Banned Book Week. But now they are a problem? Now they are hurting our kids? Why? What happened?

At the end of the school year, every single copy of these titles (and many more) were listed under ‘Obsolete Items’ section of the school board meeting agenda. Discretely voted out the backdoor without pomp, circumstance or even due process.

Perhaps the craziest part of this whole episode was the complete lack of transparency. Parents were never given any warning. The public was never even told which titles were at risk of being banned. Dozens of parents emailed the district throughout the 2022-2023 school year asking for the names of the titles pulled for review. No answers were ever provided. In fact, Penridge

spent large amounts of taxpayer money on attorneys to fight Right-To-Know requests that parents submitted seeking that very information.

And the result? There was no time for parents to read the books for themselves and draw our own conclusions. No chance to say “hey wait, stop. What are we doing? These books are **not porn.**” No opportunity to defend the First Amendment rights of their own kids. It was all done under the banner of ‘Parental Rights.’ It is so hard to swallow that irony.

My oldest child is only in third grade. People often ask me: Why do you even care about this book banning thing in the high school library anyways? The answer is simple. Because I care about her future. I’ve read enough history to understand that book banning leads to other bad ideas. And let’s be clear, this has not stopped at our school libraries.

As groups have been successful in their efforts to limit access to books in schools, they have been emboldened to try out the same tactics at our local public library. In nearby Telford Borough, certain councilmen are insisting that the Indian Valley Public Library remove LGBTQ books from their collection at the threat of pulling their funding. Again, under the false flag of “protecting children.”

It is a bad path that I don’t want to see this country take. I ask lawmakers to do what they can to put an end to this attack on our libraries. How many times do we need to relearn the same lesson?

My oldest daughter has a thirst for knowledge. She is an avid reader. Her favorite genre is realistic fiction. Thanks to her wonderful teachers, she reads well above her grade level. She enjoys reading about difficult topics. She wants to better understand the world: the good, the bad, the ugly. She reads, we talk, and she asks questions. That is a healthy instinct that I, **as her dad**, would like to continue to foster into her high school years. But most importantly, I want to be the adult who parents what she reads, not self-proclaimed moralist politicians.

I think about the type of high school student that would walk into the school library in today’s age; with all the technology, phones, TikTok, video games, and other distractions, looking for a book to read. What kind of young adult would pull *Sold* off the shelf, read the jacket, and then check it out? It is clear from the cover what this book is about. It addresses the very difficult topic of the trafficking of children in India.

I’ve read this book myself, it is the farthest thing from pornography that you could ever imagine. In fact, if this is your idea of pornography, you are sick. It is a story about hope, perseverance, and survival under the worst possible circumstances...it shows the immense strength of the human spirit... but at the same time, as you can imagine, it is difficult to read.

It takes a special type of young adult to want to tackle this book. A student who wants to understand the good, the bad, and the ugly of our world. The type of person who refuses to walk through life with their head buried in the sand. The type of young adult who might be inspired to grow up and confront the **real** evil in this world. That evil is not books. Please protect the freedom to read.

Thank you.