

October 3, 2023

Dear Senate Policy Chair Katie Muth, House Policy Chair Ryan Bizzarro, Senator Amanda Cappelletti, Representative Paul Friel, and elected members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate:

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective regarding the concerning rise of efforts to challenge and ban books in our public schools.

My name is Kate Nazemi, and I am a mother of two school aged children in Central Bucks School District, in Bucks County Pennsylvania.

My family, like many families in Central Bucks, truly love our community public schools. My kids, now in 12th and 8th grade, have received an outstanding education thanks to our incredible teachers, librarians, and administrators.

School libraries are the magic space where kids transform into readers. When a librarian can put the exact right book into a student's hands, the doors of life swing open.

Books widen students' horizons, broaden their perspectives, spark imagination, and teach life lessons.

Books enable children to learn how to think critically and to develop empathy and compassion for others.

Books enable children to safely process difficult emotions and experiences and help many realize that they are not alone when coping with difficult challenges.

Books provide a sense of belonging.

Ultimately, books empower children by enabling them to better understand themselves and the world around them.

We want all students to read great books of their own choosing and to fall passionately in love with reading. I believe the best way to do that is to show them a diverse array of age-relevant books in their schools.

This is precisely why I and many others in my community choose to fight the rapidly intensifying movement to challenge and remove books in school libraries in my district, and across PA.

Right now, Pennsylvania ranks among the top five states in the country for book bans, even though a significant majority of Pennsylvanians are opposed to banning books.

Imagine taking a single scene or isolated image out of context, with no consideration of a book in its entirety, and the book is suddenly at risk for removal from our library shelves.

That's exactly the policy that my school district enacted in 2022. It's out of the norm. It intentionally ignores the literary merit and critical acclaim of age-relevant books in favor of vague and overly

broad prohibitions on excerpts of “sexual content” chilling educators book choices and students’ freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment.

You can read a summary of the decision [here](#).

You can read the Central Bucks Library Policy [here](#).

You can read the Central Bucks Library Policy Administrative Regulations [here](#).

My school district, like so many others in PA, is on the slippery slope to censorship. Where does this end?

Right now, in Florida there are censorship efforts that have removed race from the Rosa Parks story. Another Florida district Superintendent directed librarians to remove all books with LGBTQ characters. We don’t know what parts of history or which members of our community could be erased next.

In September, PEN America published their 2023 sobering report on censorship: [Banned in the USA: The Mounting Pressure to Censor](#):

“The toll of the book banning movement is getting worse. More kids are losing access to books, more libraries are taking authors off the shelves, and opponents of free expression are pushing harder than ever to exert their power over students as a whole. Those who are bent on the suppression of stories and ideas are turning our schools into battlegrounds, compounding post-pandemic learning loss, driving teachers out of the classroom and denying the joy of reading to our kids. By depriving a rising generation of the freedom to read, these bans are eating away at the foundations of our democracy.” Suzanne Nossel, Chief Executive Officer of PEN America

A few notable findings from the report akin to the censorship tactics in Central Bucks:

- Hyperbolic and misleading rhetoric about “porn in schools” and “sexually explicit,” “harmful,” and “age inappropriate” materials led to the removal of thousands of books covering a range of topics and themes for young audiences.
- Prohibitions overwhelmingly target YA books featuring female, queer, and/or nonbinary protagonists.
- Calls for books to be removed have frequently and inaccurately labeled books as “harmful” or “obscene,” and conflated any LGBTQ+ content with “pornography,” in a reliance on long-standing, discriminatory tropes.
- More and more districts, board members, school administrators, educators, and librarians are facing both community pressure and state legislation restricting what books they can make available to students. This has left many educators and administrators feeling forced to remove books because of intimidation or fear of penalty.

As a parent, I am deeply concerned that censorship tactics which inaccurately label books as “harmful” or “obscene,” contributed to the Central Bucks Library policy in 2022 that the majority in my community opposed, including our own district librarians, teachers, 1000’s of community members who petitioned, and repeated censorship warnings from the ELC, NAACP, ACLU, PSLA, FIRE, PFLAG, and National Coalition Against Censorship.

You can read the following censorship warnings sent to CBSD School Board Directors here:

[Two letters from the Education Law Center:](#)

“The Proposed Policies 109, 109.1 and 109.2 seek to broadly exclude books that include sexual conduct, claiming it is “generally inappropriate and/or unnecessary for minors in school.” But the Supreme Court has clearly held that a Board may not remove books “simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to ‘prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion or other matters of opinion.’”

“Education Law Center (ELC) provides this letter in response to continuing concerns brought to our attention by parents in Central Bucks School District regarding the Board’s proposed policies relating to book selection and removal. We urge the Board to reject the proposed Policy 109.2 (the Policy) in its current form and make further revisions as described in our May 19 letter and herein. Without such revisions, the Policy impermissibly violates students’ First Amendment right to receive information and ideas.”

[Bucks County NAACP](#)

“Central Bucks School District is joining the escalating force of book banning in response to a small group of extremely vocal parents who are far from representing the majority and truly do not speak for Black and Brown parents whose voices must be included in the conversation.”

[PA ACLU](#)

“These new rules amount to censorship, plain and simple. It’s not just wrong, it’s probably illegal. And once books start flying off shelves, we will see you in court.”

[PSLA](#)

“Books are an opportunity for them to experience authentic portrayals of children whose backgrounds, abilities, and circumstances are different from their own. PSLA advocates for policies that include, not exclude, all students... PSLA stands behind the professional expertise and sound judgment of Central Bucks School District’s school librarians.”

[FIRE](#)

“Policy 109.2 considerably narrows students’ opportunities for self-education and individual enrichment outside the classroom. Here are just some of the renowned books the policy may ban from high schools for containing “explicit written descriptions of sexual acts”:

- Slaughterhouse Five
- Siddhartha
- The Bluest Eye
- Beloved
- I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
- Ulysses

- The Perks of Being a Wallflower
- The Kite Runner
- Catch-22
- Native Son
- The Handmaid's Tale
- The Color Purple

The policy would also broadly restrict the inclusion of classic and popular literature in middle school libraries by requiring staff to prioritize materials that do not contain “implied written description of sexual acts or implied nudity.” Titles affected by this provision could include (in addition to everything on the above list):

- 1984
- The Catcher in the Rye
- The Odyssey
- The Great Gatsby
- Brave New World
- A Farewell to Arms
- The Hunger Games
- Lord of the Flies
- Flowers for Algernon
- Invisible Man
- The Bible

Sweeping restrictions on certain subject matter—whether sex, violence, drug use, or any other potentially controversial topic—are a blunt tool and a poor substitute for individualized, contextual assessment of a work’s educational value or age-appropriateness.”

[NCAC](#)

“Our second concern is that the proposed policy does not include safeguards to ensure that books are not improperly removed based on the views they express. The Supreme Court has warned that “school boards may not remove books from library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books” Board of Education v. Pico, 457 U.S. 853, 872 (1982) (plurality opinion). But your proposed policy includes many vague and undefined terms that create opportunities for unconventional and controversial ideas to be censored. It provides that books that contain “sexualized” and “inappropriate” content must be removed from school libraries.”

[Texas librarian](#)

“It is a slippery slope when districts begin responding to concerns over a few books by changing long standing state and local policies without the rigor required. And there are professionals (librarians and teachers) who are very knowledgeable in this area. We would hope the district would rely on their expertise. Surely, if a new field were needed for the football team, or new wrestling mats needed, wouldn't the coach's advice be critical to that decision?”

[PFLAG](#)

“Kids deserve the chance to learn and develop critical thinking skills, no matter where they come from, transgender or not, straight or LGBTQ+. Removing the resources that empower a child to learn and ask questions removes a critical function of education. No single story or a couple of stories suffice to represent the diversity of an entire group.”

[Community petition](#) signed by 3,369 people to “Uphold Central Buck's National Library Collection Standards & Library Bill of Rights”:

“The signers of this petition seek to uphold current CB library collection procedures that are in alignment with AASL National School Library Standards, so book selection remains unbiased, objective, and representative of all points of view. We seek to sustain the Library Bill of Rights, as specified below, which states in part that “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval, and that libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.”

You can read about our press conference held before the vote [here](#).

Five months of parent, student, teacher, librarian, legal, and professional concern went completely ignored.

Instead, our board majority used misleading rhetoric and collaborated, *in private*, with the Independence Law Center (ILC), a Harrisburg religious liberties law firm, an affiliate of the [Pennsylvania Family Institute](#), the state branch of the [Family Research Council](#) (FRC), to write the restrictive policy.

None of this was known publicly until a [local investigative journalist uncovered](#) it in November 2022. The PA Family Institutes’ national affiliate, the FRC, takes the following position on sexual orientation: “Homosexual conduct is harmful to the persons who engage in it as it is associated with negative physical and psychological health effects.” The FRC is an [SPLC designated hate group](#).

You can read about the Independence Law Center’s private collaboration to craft our library policy administrative regulations with Central Bucks School Board directors [here](#).

This policy then paved the way to five book reviews (*This Book is Gay*, *Gender Queer Beyond Magenta*, *Lawn Boy*, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*) [two book bans](#) (*This Book is Gay*, *Gender Queer*, and more [than sixty book challenges](#)) submitted by just two people in our school district in an effort to control how other people’s children grow and think against the will of their own parents and against the best interests of education and democracy.

Parents have always had the right and an easy method to select or restrict materials for their own children in every school in Central Bucks and across PA. But it stops there. Parents should not be making decisions that impact other parents' children in public education.

[Read how the Central Bucks committees wanted 'vital' LGBTQ+ themed books to remain at high schools](#) but made the decision to remove 2 books based solely on wording of the district's library policy, which restricts access to implied or explicit sexual content and nudity. Further, the committee's full comments, in support of retaining the books, were stripped from the published reports.

Library policies that intentionally ignore the literary merit and critical acclaim of age-relevant books in favor of vague and overly broad prohibitions on excerpts of "sexual content" is one of the methods used in the growing national movement to censor library materials.

This wave of censorship is a blatant attempt to erase our collective history and silence countless students, families, and communities. This is an assault on democracy and public school's collective obligation to educate every child.

High school kids in Central Bucks are truly heartbroken that some of their favorite award-winning books are at risk for removal: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Looking for Alaska*, to name just a few.

The message this sends to them: Certain ideas are not welcome. We are telling our students that their desire to read and learn matters less than political extremists desire to sow division and spread misinformation.

We must turn away from division and fear and toward education and freedom.

We must elect leaders who support principled deliberation, research-based decision making, and a commitment to the best interest of all our students.

We must balance a parent's interest in guiding their child with public school's mandate to educate each student.

We need legislation to protect research-based, standard PSLA, PSBA school library policy. We must balance a parent's interest in guiding their child with the school's mandate to educate every student. Every family must retain the right for their kid to read high quality, age-appropriate literature freely and according to their interests in every school district in the commonwealth.

This is a matter of parents' rights, of students' rights, and of the state's obligation in a just, multiracial democracy to educate each of our children freely, honestly and accurately.