

Senate Policy Chair Katie Muth, House Policy Chair Ryan Bizarro, Senator Amada Cappelletti, Representative Paul Friel, and elected members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this crucial issue today – the issue of censorship in the public schools of our commonwealth. It is essential that we recognize the tactics used by right-wing groups to ban books and materials that promote diversity and inclusivity in our educational system. It is also important to formulate a plan. One that will confront organized attacks on education across our commonwealth – because these attacks from far-right groups, are impacting teachers and librarians who are acting in good faith to provide a well-rounded and inclusive education.

A small bit of background about me – I have been a social studies teacher in Central Bucks for 23 years. I have been an advisor for my school's gay-straight alliance since 2017. I have my Master of Arts in teaching from the University of Pittsburgh and I also have my Administrator/Supervisor certificate from Delaware Valley University. I mention the admin piece, because I think that experience has helped provide me with some ability to see the world of education not only through a teacher lens, but through the lens of an administrator. It has also helped me to navigate school law and the rights of educators to speak on matters of community concern. With that being said, I speak not as a representative of my school district today. I speak as a citizen of the commonwealth with great concern about the future of public education.

In our democratic society, public education plays a fundamental role in shaping the values and perspectives of our future generations. It should be a place where all students feel safe, valued, and empowered to explore diverse ideas and perspectives. However, in the last three years, right-wing groups including "Moms 4 Liberty" have been attempting to stifle this very essence of education.

The banning of books has made headlines across our commonwealth. Groups argue that certain books are "inappropriate" for students, and they talk about "Parental Rights." But often, the targeted books are ones that address issues of diversity, inclusion, and LGBTQ+ identities. And these groups such as m4l, are not content to restrict books and resources for their child alone (which they are entitled to do), but rather they seek to eliminate these books and resources for the entire student body.

I found myself at the nexus of the book controversy in the fall of 2021. Even though I am not a librarian, I'm a social studies teacher, I have a small library of approximately 50-60 lgbtq+ titles to support the gay-straight alliance in my school. I've always been told that even though I may be social studies, we are all teachers of reading and writing, which I've embraced. To that end, I collaborated with our librarians to curate a list of books appropriate for the middle school reader. I trust my fellow educators; I trust my librarians – these are the natural experts in the field of literature that I sought counsel from. These books were purchased with grant money from a local educational non-profit that was partnered with the district. A partnership that no-longer exists (which some individuals, including the president of the organization, believe my grant is part of the severance of that relationship). Political extremists trespassed into my classroom after-hours, created a video of the library that they set to creepy music, and then superimposed books into the

library that are not in my collection when they didn't find the controversial titles they had hoped to (such as *Lawnboy* or *Gender Queer*). This was floated on right wing social media.

On top of the video, a website created by a local right extremist called "WokePa" featured my library, some titles they found inappropriate, and then slandered me by falsely saying I give students extra credit to take them to gay pride parades. The insinuation that I'm "grooming kids" was being made clear. These tactics are more than just words on a website, or videos that appear on one's social media accounts – because they "misinform" the community, and then my name and the work I'm doing gets brought up at public comment in school board meetings. This then prompts the administration to respond.

The books in the GSA library have been audited, a list shared with the public relations director for the district, and it has been held to a higher standard than any other classroom library – merely because of the subject matter. Some books were removed because of one parent's complaint. Some books that did not have enough supportive professional reviews online were boxed away for fear of future controversy. The library still exists as an important support for students – I credit my building administrators for their continued support. I recognize they navigate a difficult path supporting their staff, doing what is best for students, while being held sway to the politics of the community, and serving at the pleasure of the school board who may have different ideologies on supporting LGBTQ+ students and other marginalized groups.

The controversy with the GSA library, and books in general, has created another layer of censorship though. That is, the pressure on teachers who feel compelled to self-censor in the face of tension from external groups, unsupportive administrators, or even parents. The fear of backlash or the threat to their job security can force teachers to think twice about introducing materials that may be deemed controversial, even if those materials are educationally valuable and promote empathy and understanding. I know colleagues who have done this with collections in their own classroom; collections that support the curriculum. Some colleagues have removed their classroom libraries altogether. This is not limited to literature though, there are fears of even teaching history, or showing artwork of the Renaissance without being accused of exposing students to salacious material. When a colleague asked our social studies supervisor about Renaissance art, he was told it was supported, but it's hard to know where the line is. It isn't far-fetched to think that a teacher in the commonwealth could be accused of showing pornography, when they were showing Renaissance art. This literally happened in Florida – and many of our policies and politics in schools are beginning to reflect what is happening there. Teachers need to be protected from undue pressures to self-censor. Is this not the point of tenure? They should be able to choose materials that are educationally valuable without fear of repercussions. They are the experts in their field and know what is age appropriate.

Right-wing groups such as Moms 4 liberty in Bucks have used misinformation and fear tactics to gain influence in the Central Bucks community and others throughout the commonwealth. They spread false narratives about the content of certain materials taking one line or excerpt, to nullify the value of an entire work. These books are not even being read by these book-banners. The book-banning effort is a highly organized political

campaign to whitewash public education. A parent who seeks to book ban only needs to go to websites such as “Book Looks” to find the titles they consider inappropriate according to their values and faith. Books that mention “different gender ideologies’ for example are targets of their bans. In a conversation with a librarian, she had said she could have more respect for a parent’s complaint that a book should not belong if they even read it, but librarians are fully aware of the systemic efforts to ban books. The far right has made it easy. For example, within a matter of days, two parents challenged 60 books, I doubt a single one was read.

The book banners play on parents' concerns for their children's well-being and the damage to their children’s innocence. But the real damage happening is the loss of lgbtq+ stories, works of black and indigenous authors, and people of color, in our schools. All students deserve to see themselves reflected in our buildings, in our curriculum, and in our literature. When we ban books, particularly those of marginalized communities – it sends a message – that these stories don’t belong, that these stories are perhaps invalid, perhaps perverse, and that the lives reflected in them are not worthy of being in school. If these books don’t belong, what does this say to lgbtq+ children, and people of color? It sends the message that you don’t belong here either. Perhaps a lgbtq+ teacher doesn’t belong.

In conclusion, the issue of censorship in Pennsylvania schools is an immediate concern that we cannot ignore. There are districts out there who are fully supportive of students who are transgender, gay, persons of color. I cite Upper Dublin as an example. A district that has resisted book bans, and even flies the Pride flag during the month of June. Their support is reflected not in rhetoric, but their policies, and their actions. We can look to them and the efforts of our politicians for help. No child should have their dignity censored because of the zip code they live in, and the school district they attend. We must stand up against censorship, promote diversity and inclusivity in our educational institutions throughout the commonwealth, and ensure that all students have access to a well-rounded education. This is how we prepare our youth for the challenges and opportunities of the world. Thank you.