



Pennsylvania School Librarians Association

Good morning, members of the House and Senate Democratic Policy Committee,

My name is Sarah DeMaria and I am a high school librarian in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania as well as the President-Elect of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA). Thank you for your invitation today to speak to you about the alarming practice of censorship in schools and libraries in Pennsylvania. In the past year alone, school librarians have been faced with an increase in challenges, organized attacks on sound policy, and subjected to school board members who are biased toward regional parent groups, all in an effort to undermine our students' First Amendment Rights. School librarians have also been targeted with harassment, hostility, unfounded accusations, and organized bullying campaigns. But even under fire, school librarians continue to stand up for our students' rights to intellectual freedom and access to relevant literature.

As you may know, this week is Banned Books Week, a week which is celebrated across the nation in recognition of students' right to read and their constitutional right to access information. According to the American Library Association, when material is challenged it is an attempt to remove or restrict a title because one person or group finds it objectionable. If the material is then removed, it is considered a "banned book" (American Library Association). PEN America specifically defines school book bans as, "...any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished" (Meehan et al). Yet in the past year, those who oppose our efforts to provide balanced, equitable access to materials have tried to change the narrative that a book removed or restricted from a school library is not "banned" because it is still available to the general public by other means. Just because this twist of semantics has been repeated, it does not make it true. Censorship must be called out for what it is. Removing, restricting or imposing policy and intimidation on school librarians that limits the selection of material will harm all of our students. These tactics create barriers that deny the rights of all Pennsylvanians that are guaranteed in our Constitution.

One of the many functions of a school library is to provide free access to voluntary inquiry materials, with an emphasis on choice. Choice, or empowering children to choose what they want to read, is an important step in the metacognitive growth of recognizing who they are as readers. Readers come in all abilities and interests. As readers learn to recognize their interests and abilities, they are better able to find the "right fit" text to read. School libraries are filled with choices for students, none of which are meant to be assigned or forced. Our collections are curated so that all students may have the ability to

freely access information and stories that may represent themselves or others unlike them. This also means that the school librarian is obligated to curate a balanced collection. A collection in which students can see themselves, explore new perspectives, and challenge their own pre-existing thoughts and prejudices. School librarians serve as consultants to their building's faculty and administrators concerning the acquisition of library materials and the use of library facilities. Selected print and digital materials support the educational goals of the district, and the materials meet the highest standards of quality in both content and presentation. School librarians have policies and procedures in place for selecting materials by using professional review tools, looking for curricular connections, and finding relevant and developmentally-appropriate materials, free from stereotypes.

School librarians take the selection of materials very seriously with their patrons in mind. We carefully choose resources for the school library collection that meet the academic, literacy, and social and emotional learning needs of all students. We guide learners to relevant, reliable, and authoritative books and resources within the library. We advocate for representation in school library collections because representation matters. All young people deserve to see themselves represented in the stories contained within a book. As author and artist ND Stevenson recently wrote of their childhood, "I searched the world for some reflection of myself somewhere, anywhere [...] Seeing yourself in the world, knowing that you're not alone, that you could actually have a future as yourself – it's lifesaving." Children should likewise have access to literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people. Books are an opportunity for them to experience authentic portrayals of children whose backgrounds, abilities, and circumstances are different from their own. PEN America found that, "Overwhelmingly, book bans target books on race or racism or featuring characters of color, as well as books with LGBTQ+ characters," further marginalizing these groups (Meehan et al.). PSLA advocates for library collections that include, not exclude, all students.

Most of the books that are currently being banned are meant for the YA, or young adult audiences. YA literature is typically defined as literature meant for ages 12-18, the type of book read before adult literature and after middle-grade literature. The protagonist in YA literature is usually an adolescent themselves and the voice and style provides an "in the moment" flow and sense of immediacy since this is reflective of teens' lives. The content of YA literature is edgy and contains grit because just as adolescents are trying to make sense of their world, they are made to live in the constraints of social boundaries while their instinct is to push those boundaries (Salao). YA literature is the absolute safest place for adolescents to push these boundaries and experience the protagonists' authentic consequences rather than their own. The books that are being restricted or removed from students specifically are meant for them. PEN America states that, "... this year, banned books also include books on physical abuse, health and well-being, and themes of grief and death. Notably, most instances of book bans affect young adult books, middle grade books, chapter books, or picture books—books specifically written and selected for younger audiences" (Meehan et al.).

PSLA stands behind the professional expertise of Pennsylvania's school librarians to select relevant material for their students. We recognize and respect the work that trained, certified school librarians do to connect students with the right book at the right time. We also advocate for parental involvement in the

reading journey of each individual student by encouraging open conversations with parents to identify relevant reading choices for their own children, while respecting parents' beliefs and the unique learning needs of each child. School libraries have procedures in place allowing for the review and reconsideration of books in the library collection, should a parent, student, or staff member have concerns about a particular title.

With such policies in place, it is particularly concerning that families and those generally concerned with the contents of the school library's collection are not asking the school librarian for a solution that suits their needs. To school librarians, it feels as though our professionalism is not being considered. In one case, law enforcement was called to one school library due to the presence of a book that one parent deemed objectionable. In another county in Pennsylvania, seven police reports were filed naming books the complainants felt were pornographic or obscene; the investigation by the District Attorney that followed determined that none of the books met these definitions. Administrators and board members have removed titles or forced school librarians to remove books from shelves, fueled by the loud voices of very few people. School boards are passing policies and administrators are setting regulations that are not being followed, resulting in a lack of due process for these titles when they disappear from the shelves. Open school librarian positions are not being filled and school librarians are being reassigned to other departments. School library programs are being renamed or phased out. School board policies are stripping school librarians from their professionalism under the guise of "accountability". There is a tidal wave of backdoor tactics happening within school organizations to avoid public knowledge. It is not okay and we, the school librarians, are not okay while our students suffer as the real victims.

Censorship in all forms is meant to control what our young people can know, learn, and make of the world. Our students deserve better. Our students deserve to be able to voluntarily seek information. To know the world around them. To seek understanding of multiple perspectives and viewpoints. To be recognized by the adults in their lives as capable learners and users of information. To critically think for themselves so they can develop into informed citizens. Pennsylvania school librarians are critical to supporting these skills and upholding these rights. Thank you for this opportunity to speak out in solidarity with the school librarians who support every child's freedom to read, their access to school library collections, and their First Amendment rights.

Works Cited

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