

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, Honorable Committee Members—

My name is Brandon Russell, and I live in St. Mary's County. I'm testifying today to urge a favorable report on HB785, the Freedom to Read Act.

The idea of needing a law codifying the right for everyone to read, to access knowledge, to expand their understanding of the world is ridiculous. But it is necessary to preserve access to information, and to protect the rights of professionals like librarians and media specialists who assist the public. Religious-based conservative movements across the nation have also taken root within the state of Maryland, clearly targeting material they judge as unacceptable.

Superintendents and local boards of education have been faced with making decisions to restrict or outright exclude access to library materials. In St. Mary's County, and elsewhere, there is a clear effort to prop up and elect conservative-minded school board candidates. As long as those candidates support conservative based family values there will be a threat to representation of ideas, experiences, and people from a variety of backgrounds and sources. To be clear, I respect the right of everyone to have their own beliefs. I do, however, patriotically object to imposing their beliefs on others.

While it may seem like this legislation is only intended to protect marginalized communities and their voices, it actually protects everyone from the forceful and unfair infliction of another's ideology. Moreover, it prohibits erasure of ideas because of disagreement by those in decision making positions. I considered what it may be like for a library employee to work under the increased scrutiny of the book-banning movement. Everyone has a right to work in a professional environment without consistent fear of losing their employment. This law will provide a sense of protection.

As an LGBTQ+ Marylander, I appreciate this bill being brought forward. In the more rural areas of our state, it can be difficult for our LGBTQ+ population to access resources and build a sense of community. I sit on the board of Pride SOMD. My husband is President of PFLAG SOMD. We volunteer a lot of our time working to shape and create a more welcoming community. Several years ago, we experienced our County Commissioners financially penalizing the county library for allowing PFLAG to host a story hour which was disrupted by religious protestors. This is not a superficial bill, it has serious implications, and I reiterate, it is absolutely necessary for this bill to receive a favorable report.

Thank you,

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