

## **HB785 / SB738 - Freedom to Read Act**

Testimony Submitted by Michele Schlehofer Copper

Dear Chair Delegate Atterbeary, Vice Chair Delegate Wilkins, and members of the Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for **House Bill 785**, the **Freedom to Read Act**, a bipartisan piece of legislation which is vital to protecting people's access to information in our public libraries and to protect libraries from censorship efforts.

The last three years have witnessed an enormous surge in requests to remove books from schools and libraries. Rather than the occasional complaint from a concerned parent, librarians have been facing coordinated challenges to long lists of titles, submitted by organized political groups such as Moms for Liberty and their counterparts. Even more concerning, librarians are facing significant pressure to remove books without adhering to established book challenge procedures, at risk of losing their jobs.

Libraries in Maryland have not been immune from these challenges. Here in Wicomico County, where I reside, *All Boys Aren't Blue* was removed from school libraries under the direction of former Superintendent of Schools Dr. Donna Hanlin—despite the fact that no one filed a book reconsideration request and without putting the book through the district's reconsideration procedure. Several other titles were temporarily removed from school library shelves—again, despite the lack of any formal reconsideration request. The school board is currently under pressure from a coordinated political group to remove *even more* titles—books ranging from preschool picture books to high school fiction—again, despite the lack of any formal reconsideration request and without putting the books under the district's reconsideration procedure.

The Freedom to Read Act would protect against these assaults on intellectual freedom by requiring that all public libraries, including school libraries, adopt a collection development policy that complies with new State standards in order to qualify for funding. Those standards state that libraries cannot exclude materials from the collection or remove them based on partisan or doctrinal disapproval. The bill also seeks to protect library staff by prohibiting county boards of education and governing bodies from retaliating against employees who act in a manner consistent with State standards.

All members of our community should see themselves reflected in library materials, and should be able to access materials representing a diversity of perspectives. Restricting materials is counterintuitive to the American ideals of liberty, and supporting the Freedom to Read should not be a political issue. Reading is a foundational skill, critical to future learning and to exercising our democratic freedoms. Libraries provide access to books that offer teachable moments for readers of all ages and expand our understanding of people with different backgrounds, ideas, and beliefs. It is more important than ever to stand up for the First Amendment rights of students and library users. I urge you to give **HB785 / SB738 - Freedom to Read Act** a **favorable** report in committee.