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HB 785 - Freedom to Read Act House Ways and Means Committee February 21, 2024

SUPPORT

**Donna S. Edwards
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Maryland State and DC AFL-CIO

Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 785. My name is Donna S. Edwards, and I am the President of the Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO. On behalf of Maryland's 300,000 union members, I offer the following comments because we must take the controversy over availability of reading materials very seriously.

HB 785 establishes statewide standards for public libraries, requiring that library materials and resources exist for all persons, prohibits excluding material because of the origin or background of the authors, and prohibits partisan removal of material. HB 785 then ties funding of the public libraries to meeting these prudent statewide standards. In practice, HB 785 indirectly prohibits libraries from banning material due to disagreements with the authors or partisan objections to the contents of the books.

Libraries and librarians have been under attack in the past few years. In 2022, there were 1,296 registered attempts to censor books at different library systems according to the American Library Association.¹ Some libraries have even faced bomb threats from members of the public objecting to the content of books they offer.² The New York Times reported that some librarians were even accused by members of the public of criminal activity, writing, "A complaint was made to the Clinton Township Police Department about obscene materials in a library book. The Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office said none of the information it received indicated criminal conduct. In Granbury, Texas, a county constable opened an investigation about books available in a high school library after receiving a complaint."³ These book bans and attacks on libraries do not only damage the workers, the Public School Review argues, that "Shielding children from these crucial themes through practices such as book banning has far-reaching implications beyond limiting their literary exposure. It can cause a detrimental deficit in their ability to empathize with experiences outside their immediate

¹ Tracie D. Hall, "Attacks on Libraries Are Attacks on Democracy." Time. September 2023.

² Adora Namigadde, "Local librarians say unfounded bomb threats represent a deeper political, cultural divide." Chicago Sun Times. September 2023.

³ Elizabeth Harris, "With Rising Book Bans, Librarians Have Come Under Attack." New York Times. June 2023.

understanding, inhibit the development of their critical thinking skills, and impair their awareness and knowledge of intricate societal problems that require their engagement and responsiveness for societal progress and reform.”⁴

Librarians and public library systems are essential parts of our democratic system. They guarantee the free flow of information. If state money is to be used to support these public institutions, it is important that state tax dollars are not going to subsidize censorship and attacks on librarians.

We urge a favorable report on HB 785.

⁴ Kennedy, “Understanding the Consequences of Banning Books in K-12 Education.” Public School Review. October 30, 2023.