



**Maryland Commission
on LGBTQIA+ Affairs**

**TESTIMONY OF JEREMY BROWNING
DIRECTOR, MARYLAND COMMISSION ON LGBTQIA+ AFFAIRS
FAVORABLE STATEMENT ON HB0785
FREEDOM TO READ ACT**

February 21, 2024

Ways and Means Committee

The Hon. Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Chair
The Hon. Jheanelle K. Wilkins, Vice Chair

Chair Atterbeary, Vice-Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee, my name is Jeremy Browning(he/him), and I am the Director of the Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs. The Commission was created by the 2021 Maryland General Assembly, and later altered in 2023, to assess challenges facing our LGBTQIA+ communities, establish best practices and recommendations for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, and provide testimony to legislative and administrative bodies.

The Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs is in strong support of House Bill 785, the Freedom to Read Act. Preventing book bans is a top priority for the Commission, and this legislation is vital in ensuring that libraries across Maryland uphold the principles of inclusivity, diversity, and intellectual freedom.

The Commission is deeply concerned about the recent wave of book bans targeting materials with LGBTQIA+ content or characters. Such censorship not only restricts access to important literary works, but seeks to erase LGBTQIA+ individuals and families from public life, perpetuating discrimination and marginalization.

The Commission has extensively researched and analyzed the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in our state's education system. Reports such as the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey and the GLSEN 2021 Maryland State Snapshot reveal distressing data regarding the safety and well-being of LGBTQIA+ students in Maryland's schools.

These reports consistently demonstrate that Maryland's K-12 schools are frequently unsafe and hostile environments for LGBTQIA+ students. They experience alarming rates of bullying, harassment, assault, and discrimination from multiple sources, including peers, educators, administrators, and even family members. The consequences of this hostility are severe, leading to lower academic achievement, diminished mental health, and increased risk of suicidal ideation and behavior among LGBTQIA+ youth.

Moreover, the presence of anti-LGBTQIA+ groups in Maryland and across the nation further exacerbates these challenges, spreading misinformation and advocating for harmful policies that endanger the well-being of LGBTQIA+ youth. In this context, House Bill 785 safeguards our libraries by establishing State standards, which emphasize the importance of providing materials, services, and resources for the interest, information and enlightenment of all individuals. Public libraries should reflect the communities they serve and not exclude materials because of the origin, background, or views of the creator, or partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

By incorporating these standards into library operations and policies, we can ensure that libraries remain inclusive spaces where diverse voices are celebrated and respected. Additionally, the provision to protect librarians for upholding these standards is crucial in preventing county boards of education and governing bodies from retaliating against library employees.

For these reasons, the Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs urges a favorable report on House Bill 785.

REFERENCES:

GLSEN. (2023). School Climate for LGBTQ+ Students in Maryland (2021 State Snapshot: Maryland). New York: GLSEN.

GLSEN. (2022). The 2021 National School Climate Survey (Executive Summary). New York: GLSEN.