

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL HB0785 - FAVORABLE

Freedom to Read Act

TO: Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee

FROM: Wendy Novak, Carroll County, Maryland

February 19, 2024

Books are magical. They allow you to have a window to another world, or a mirror into your own. Reading is the key to lifelong learning and helps grow vocabulary. Research shows that high quality library programs are correlated to student achievement. A high-quality library program can help close racial achievement gaps. It is good for our students to read; we need to be doing what we can to support them. Kids need access to a variety of books. Our students of color and/or LGBTQIA+ students may want to read books with characters like them. Sadly, some parents want to restrict access for all students, not just their own. There has been a huge increase in attempts to restrict what books are available for our children to read. In Carroll County fifty-six titles from the school libraries were removed from shelves in response to challenges organized by the local Moms for Liberty chapter. The challenged books included a disproportionate amount of female (67%) and non-binary (12%) authors, and a disproportionate amount of LGBTQIA+ (45%) characters and characters of color (29%). Books that are frequently used for APA curriculum and exams were included on that list, such as "Slaughterhouse-Five," "The Bluest Eye," and "The Handmaid's Tale." Parents are determining what is available in our library; parents that believe our LGBTQIA+ students are not appropriate for their kids to know they exist. Parents that believe discussions about trauma should only be shared with a counselor, anyone that talks about their trauma is open to ridicule, believe books written by survivors of trauma are pornography. These parents are not qualified to determine what should be available for our schools. Unreasonable burdens have been placed on the librarians. Carroll created a "Sexually Explicit materials" policy that is so vague, it is likely it will be biased against our LGBTQIA+ community and/or students of color. It is not fair that a student in one county might not have access to materials that interest or represent them because their county will not allow it. Our librarians are trained to curate a library. State standards will allow librarians to create the high-quality libraries our students deserve.

I request a favorable report on House Bill 785.