

I am submitting favorable testimony for HB0785. My name is Maria Smith and I am a resident of Carroll County and parent of two school-aged children.

Carroll County Public Schools (CCPS) Media Specialists are under unnecessary pressure to conform to a conservative agenda put forth by the majority of the CCPS Board of Education (BOE) members as well as local parent groups like Moms for Liberty.

In 2023, Moms for Liberty members initiated reconsideration requests for over 60 books. Due to this unprecedented volume of requests being submitted at once, the Superintendent opted to remove all of the books until they could be reviewed by the Reconsideration Committee. At the rate of approximately 5 books being reviewed each month, this process will take a full calendar year to complete. To date, three books have been permanently removed (banned) from CCPS after going through the reconsideration process. A large portion of the challenged books are written by queer authors or contain LGBTQ characters and/or themes. While certain BOE members claim that is mere coincidence, one only need look at their previous actions to see how little support they offer the LGBTQ students of CCPS.

In April 2022, a LGBTQ student, with support of the Westminster chapter of PFLAG, offered to donate pride flags to each school in the district for staff to take if they chose to do so. In response, the BOE voted 4-1 (Dr. Patricia Dorsey being the only one to dissent) to ban all pride flags from schools. This sent a very clear message to all LGBTQ students, staff and allies that their safety and acceptance were not a priority to the BOE.

Continuing to entertain these book ban requests appears to go against state standards. The legislation, if passed, will put a stop to CCPS excluding material “because of the origin, background, or views of a person who created the material; and, because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval”.

The language to prevent retaliation against a library employee for acting in accordance with state standards is particularly relevant to what is happening right now in Carroll County. In late 2023, CCPS updated Appendix J – Library Media Supplemental Material Verification Form. CCPS Media Specialists are now required to read each book they want to purchase ahead of time and complete/sign the Appendix J form accordingly. The content of Appendix J is troubling as it requires the media specialist to personally guarantee that the book meets a laundry list of “selection criteria”, including one which states there is no sexually explicit language in the book.

At the time Appendix J was updated, there was no definition for “sexually explicit”. In January 2024, an update to Board Policy IIAA-Selection, Evaluation, Adoption or Instructional Material was approved by the BOE to define “sexually explicit” as “unambiguously describing, depicting, showing, or writing about sex or sex acts in a detailed or graphic manner.” The definition is too broad and as such is very much open to interpretation. It was crafted without any input from CCPS Media Specialists. These are the trained professionals who dedicate their careers to helping put age-appropriate books into the hands of students, yet they were left entirely out of

the conversation. Appendix J, whether intentional or not, appears to signal Media Specialists to tread very carefully when ordering new titles or risk retaliation by the BOE.

I support a favorable outcome for HB0785. Media Specialists are the experts in selecting titles for schools. They should be left to do what they are educated and trained to do. It is also essential that they be protected from retaliation when following state standards conflicts with the ideology of BOE members.