

February 19, 2024

The Honorable Delegate Vanessa Atterbeary  
Taylor House Office Building, Room 131  
6 Bladen St,  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**SUBJECT: Support for the Freedom to Read Act in the 2024 MD Legislative Session**

Dear Chairwoman Atterbeary and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

I write in strong support of House Bill 785, which seeks to ensure that public libraries in Maryland uphold the “state standards” for libraries. As outlined in the bill, these standards include the guarantee that: (1) library materials exist and should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all persons the library serves; (2) a library should not exclude material from its catalogue because of the origin, background, or views of a person who created the material; and (3) a library should not proscribe or remove material from its catalogue because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. The proposed bill would protect librarians who uphold these standards, increasing the likelihood that Maryland children and youth have access to culturally and contextually relevant fiction and nonfiction materials that support their holistic, healthy development. As a lifelong educator and developmental psychologist, it is my professional opinion that this bill will provide critical protections for Maryland children and youth, whose healthy development depends, in part, on their ability to access relevant, scientifically accurate information about the questions that shape their lives.

**There is significant evidence that access to culturally and contextually, accurate, and timely information is critical to the healthy development of children and adolescents.** Children and adolescents develop in a set of nested relationships and environments that grow and change over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Research shows that these relationships -- and the tools, texts, and materials that shape them -- provide critical support for positive development (Sameroff, 2010). Although the specific qualities of positive relationships vary across ecological and developmental contexts, several aspects of these relationships are universally supportive; relationships work best when they are *developmentally and contextually relevant, reciprocal, reliable, and flexible* (Brion-Meisels & Jones, 2012). Because each child/adolescent moves through the world with a unique set of cultural and contextual experiences, it is impossible for one set of relationships or texts to be equally beneficial for all youth. Rather, children need access to a range of texts/materials and relationships, such that they might draw on those best matched to their individual questions and needs.

Research is clear that **representation matters**. Students benefit from interacting with complex characters and historical narratives that include people who look like them, come from similar backgrounds, and share their experiences – particularly when these characters are presented in a positive and nuanced light (Grasso, 2016). Representation boosts self-esteem, provides models for possible future selves, and increases students’ sense of belonging in their environments (e.g., Hseu & Metzler, 2000). As Marian Wright Edelman famously wrote, “You can’t be what you can’t see.” At the same time, exposure to characters and historical moments

that center different cultures can improve cultural understanding and empathy (e.g., Steiner, Nash & Chase, 2008). Analyzing stories and historical moments with multiple perspectives improves critical thinking and perspective-taking (e.g., Monobe & Son, 2014). Finally, decades of research suggest that access to culturally relevant educational materials improves outcomes across the content areas of math, science, history/social studies, English language arts, and English as a second language (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). For example, students' reading comprehension improves when they are given access to books whose characters, places, and events reflect their own lived experiences (Christ et al., 2018). Thus, access to positive, nuanced representations of different identities, cultures, and life experiences not only improves standard academic outcomes, but also supports healthy identity development and nurtures the skills necessary for participating in civic life.

For children and youth who are systemically marginalized in the United States because of their race, ethnicity, primary language, religion, citizenship status, gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic status, access to positive, nuanced role models is particularly critical. Many of these young people are at increased risk of being failed by public schools and other institutions, as demonstrated by persistent achievement gaps (e.g., Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis<sup>1</sup>; Bradley, 2022<sup>2</sup>). For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that LGBTQ students are two to three times as likely to be bullied, and more likely to miss school; they are also significantly more likely to attempt suicide.<sup>3</sup> Systemically marginalized students are less likely to have access to teachers and other adult role models who reflect their identities, particularly in U.S. public schools, and they are less likely to encounter standard grade-level curriculum that reflects their identities in nuanced and positive ways. Thus, for these students it is particularly critical that libraries provide access to scientifically accurate, culturally relevant resources that can support their healthy development. Without access to accurate information about their health, for example, LGBTQIA+ students are likely to turn to the internet, where much of the information available is developmentally inappropriate and/or factually inaccurate. For children/youth whose parents may not share their marginalized identity, libraries provide critical access to information.

Public libraries are one of the last accessible public institutions, and the only public institution to which all children and youth have access. In the absence of robust public libraries, we know that children and youth turn to the internet, which is notorious for providing scientifically and factually inaccurate information. Yet, even within libraries, there is growing evidence that children and youth are being denied access to relevant, accurate information about their lives. In 2022, the American Library Association (ALA) catalogued the highest number of challenges to library books and materials since it began collecting data more than 20 years ago. According to the ALA, those texts most often challenged are written by or about people of color or from the LGBTQIA+ community. As my colleague Pamela Mason, who serves on the Stating Committee Against Censorship for the National Council of Teachers of English, notes, "Banning books is harmful, because the process imposes one person or group's standards, sensitivities, biases on other groups," and "limits the variety

<sup>1</sup> <https://cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/the-socioeconomic-achievement-gap-in-the-us-public-schools#:~:text=academic%20achievement%20gap.&text=Research%20has%20confirmed%20that%20lower,about%203%20academic%20years%20behind.&text=Low%20SES,-5&text=5-,It%20can%20reference%20any%20socioeconomic%20class%2C%20such,low%20SES%20or%20high%20SES>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>



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and diversity of books available to all people, especially our youth, who are exploring the world, their identities, and their values through books and through conversations with others [including] family members, peers, and other trusted adults” (Ross, 2023). The current prevalence of book bans and challenges to library material is doubly harmful for those students who are already systemically marginalized, as these bans often target the authors, characters, and books that most match their life experiences.

House Bill 785 is a critical first step in the protection of children and youth, in that it provides access to safe, reliable information about the questions that shape their lives. It is also critical to nurturing the healthy development of children and youth who may be systemically marginalized within other institutions. By ensuring that libraries and their collections remain accessible and relevant to all children, House Bill 785 supports the academic, social, and emotional wellbeing of Marland children and youth. For the foregoing reasons, I urge the committee to support House Bill 785.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gretchen Brion-Meisels".

Dr. Gretchen Brion-Meisels  
*Senior Lecturer, Harvard Graduate School of Education*