



February 19, 2024

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Honorable Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Penguin Random House supports The Freedom To Read Act (HB 785 / SB 738). We encourage the passage of this important and timely legislation.

Penguin Random House creates books for everyone – we believe that books, and the stories and ideas they hold, have the unique capacity to connect us, change us, and carry us toward a better future for generations to come.

Westminster and Hampstead, Maryland are home to two of our four nationwide distribution centers. With over 1,800 employees, we are the largest private employer in Carroll County. Penguin Random House is committed to being a good neighbor to our Carroll County community and all Marylanders.

We are proud to publish a vast range of ideas and stories from across the spectrum of identities, viewpoints, and perspectives. We have published an unrivaled mix of great literature written by more than 80 Nobel Laureates. Our fiction and nonfiction authors, hailing from all over the political spectrum, have produced some of the most widely read adult and children's books in history, reaching hundreds of millions around the world. Our distinguished array of authors includes everyone from Toni Morrison, President George W. Bush, William Faulkner, Pope Francis, Michelle Obama, Dan Brown, John Grisham, Ann Coulter, Roald Dahl, David Brooks, to Dr. Seuss.

As a publisher, we commission books based on an idea presented by an author. Once that idea finds form in a final manuscript, we begin the work of finding readers for it. Librarians and teaching professionals are the best and most skillful connectors in matching books to students. We collaborate closely with the library community to help them fulfill their mission of selecting high-quality books tailored to the specific needs and interests of the individuals and communities they serve.

Constitutional librarianship represents a crucial aspect of librarians' and educators' roles, especially in an era characterized by the increased banning of books. This approach to librarianship is grounded in the foundational principles of the Constitution and is more than just a framework for collection development—it is a commitment to our core principles of freedom,

democracy, and pluralism. Educators and librarians receive training to protect intellectual freedom, oppose censorship, promote democratic values, and encourage civil discourse between those who disagree with one another.

Book bans take a variety of forms. They include restrictions, removals, and rating systems. Even if a student can theoretically obtain a book independently, the state act of banning books creates a powerful stigma that leads to fear, ostracization, and self-censorship.

Book ban legislation is often premised on parental rights. Yet these laws fail to respect the rights of parents who want their children to have access to a variety of perspectives. They also fail to account for the rights of other stakeholders: educators, authors, and—most critically—students. Every American student has a constitutional right to access information that is relevant to them.

Age appropriateness—the pretext behind many book bans is based on—is a false construct. There is no one-size-fits-all, binary approach to matching books with readers. Students of the same age vary in their capacity for understanding based on cognitive development and life experience. Educators and librarians are trained professionals who curate books based on reading comprehension level, maturity, and their unique understanding of students' needs. This consideration ensures that the content is developmentally appropriate and aligns with the child's cognitive, emotional, and social level of understanding.

Politically charged, subjective definitions of “appropriateness” tear at the fabric of our democracy. They replace free thinking and independent exploration with orthodoxy. We must trust and empower trained educators and librarians to act in the best interest of students and communities. Age-relevant books facilitate healthy discussions around these topics, offering clear, factual, and sensitive information tailored to the child's stage of development.

At the heart of librarianship and education is the commitment to intellectual freedom—the right of individuals to seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. Protecting educators and librarians through the Freedom to Read Act empowers them to resist censorship and make a wide variety of materials available to be read voluntarily. There is a growing demand by students - and supportive parents - for books that discuss race, gender, sexuality, and history. Despite this, students are denied access to books based on objections asserted by third parties.

The legal safeguards this law provides will ensure that professionals can curate collections that reflect varied perspectives and experiences, fostering a culture of understanding and empathy among readers. Legislation that protects these professionals supports their efforts to provide access to a breadth of literature and information resources, contributing to the development of well-informed, literate, and critical-thinking citizens.

Public and school libraries are vital to Penguin Random House's purpose and business plan. The company's commitment to helping public and school libraries is part of its strategic goal to

encourage reading, literacy, and education. For Penguin Random House, this means reaching a wider and more diverse audience of readers, aligning with our shared goal of promoting literacy and a culture of reading.

For publishers, authors, and retailers, the economic impact of book bans results in decreased sales. This has reduced the sales of books by diverse authors with distinctive voices and has affected the income of existing works, as well as the prospects of future projects. Book bans significantly impede the free flow of goods and ideas. Restricting access to books based on content or subject matter can have long-term negative consequences on freedom of speech, knowledge dissemination, and societal and economic growth. Closing libraries and harassing library workers and educators negatively affects the community and its financial health. It is a dangerous precedent, allowing selective information flow based on current political or social biases.

Penguin Random House supports The Freedom to Read Act (HB 785 / SB 738), which defends the constitutional rights and professional roles of educators and librarians in Maryland. This bill is crucial for promoting intellectual freedom, democracy, and diversity in our society. Book bans of any form harm the rights of authors, parents, and – most critically- students, who deserve access to a variety of perspectives and information. We urge the Committee to pass this bill and uphold the principles of freedom, education, and inclusivity that are at the core of our mission and our democracy.