

Support for HB 785: Freedom to Read

I am not a librarian, but I am an enthusiastic library patron. After years of support for libraries at a local level, I'm now chair of the Maryland State Library Agency Board, and it is that capacity that I write in support of the Freedom to Read Act.

House Bill 785/Senate Bill 738 will help protect our libraries, librarians, and the collections our communities use to thrive in the 21st century.

This is a critical time for libraries in Maryland and across the country. As bastions of freedom, knowledge, information and resources, libraries play a pivotal role in the success of our communities. Yet, our libraries and librarians are under attack, from book bans and funding threats to politically-driven policy and personnel changes.

In a January 2024 survey conducted by MSLA, Maryland's public libraries reported a 133 percent increase in formal challenges to library materials since 2019, along with a 263 percent increase in informal challenges, such as phone calls, emails and in-person complaints. These challenges attempt to ban certain materials—which often deal with gender, sexuality, race or disabilities—and restrict Marylanders' access to important information, history, and perspective. The survey also revealed a 245 percent increase in the number of people challenging materials between 2019 and 2023.

The Freedom to Read Act establishes principles for public libraries and public school libraries to follow, including language that prevents libraries from excluding materials from their collections due to the origin, background, or views of the author, or for partisan or doctrinal reasons. These requirements are tied to state funding. The bill also prohibits county boards of education and governing boards from retaliating against employees for abiding by these principles, along with other protections for libraries and librarians.

Library collections already undergo numerous levels of review by librarians who hold advanced degrees and have completed extensive training, and are an integral part of the communities they serve. The growing number of challenges libraries have experienced in recent years, often made by people who haven't read the materials they want banned, take up valuable time and resources.

In Maryland, intellectual freedom opponents have been hiding materials or checking out the maximum number of items—all materials they want banned—and continuously renewing them

to keep them off library shelves. Others have been submitting lengthy lists of titles they want to challenge and ban.

School libraries have been hit especially hard by these censorship attempts. In a September 2023 survey conducted by the Maryland Association of School Librarians (MASL), 74 percent of respondents reported book challenges at their schools.

Some librarians have started self-censoring, which unfortunately achieves exactly what library opponents want. The MASL survey found that 53 percent of public school librarians reported not purchasing books that they were afraid would be “controversial.” Fifty-seven percent reported that book challenges have made their job more difficult and 42 percent said book challenges have had a negative impact on their personal lives and/or interactions in their communities.

Librarians are your neighbors, friends and family members. They should be working hard to create new programs, grow access for the community, and build collections to benefit all patrons. Instead, they have been thrust into the middle of a political battle and they’re being threatened with violence, funding cuts, demotions, and reassignments.

Our libraries serve as resource centers and community gathering places. They offer early-childhood literacy programs, critical for parents as they help their newborns and young children develop important language and reading skills. They offer resume-writing programs to help patrons apply for jobs their families depend on to survive. They also contribute to the health and well-being of our communities, with some libraries offering everything from free gun locks to Narcan to use in the event of an overdose. That’s on top of the thousands of books, movies, and other materials Maryland public library patrons check out every day.

I, along with the members of the Maryland State Library Agency Board, stand in support of our libraries, librarians and the important work they do. Please support the Freedom to Read Act to protect librarians and libraries—as well as readers like me—for generations to come.

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