

HB0785

February 21, 2024

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TESTIMONY ON HB0785 – FAVORABLE

Freedom to Read Act

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

FROM: Jessica Bronson

OPENING: My name is Jessica Bronson. I am a resident of District 5. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB 0785.

I am a resident of Carroll County Maryland, and a parent of two students in Carroll County Public Schools. Like most parents, I value the American ideal of intellectual freedom, as well as the right to read and to access information and ideas. Unfortunately, my local Board of Education and school officials are engaging in censorship through mass book bans, encouraged by a tiny but vocal group of extremists.

The local Board of Education and school officials are taking actions that infringe on my right as a parent to make choices for my children, as well as my children's right to access a diverse range of voices, information, and ideas.

First, school administrators removed more than 50 books from school shelves, subsequent to a flood of book challenges.¹ The removals disproportionately included books by or about people of color, LGBTQ people, and survivors of sexual assault or abuse.² Available evidence suggests that books are being targeted because of personal objections to the books' voices, ideas, or themes.³

Second, the local Board of Education recently passed a book ban policy (revised Policy IIAA)⁴ which is so astonishingly broad that it will result in the removal of classic works of literature, Pulitzer Prize winners, required reading for Advanced Placement exams, and materials to help students avoid sexual abuse. Even dictionaries and encyclopedias are feasibly subject to removal. The policy's stated intention is to get rid of "sexually explicit materials," (with no clear definition of what that means), but I strongly believe that this is merely a fig leaf; the policy is broad and vague enough that it will be easily weaponized to target books due to personal objections over the books' voices, content, or ideas.

Third, our school media specialists are being placed in an impossible position with a new rule that they will be held personally "accountable" if a book is determined to violate book ban

¹ Griffith, Kristen, "Moms for Liberty is Winning its Fight to Remove Books from one Maryland School District," Baltimore Banner, Sept. 13, 2023, available at <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/education/k-12-schools/carroll-county-maryland-schools-moms-for-liberty-ISZJNBQKRAPFD35ZEAG3X47KY/>.

² Ross, Abbi, et. al., "Challenged books in Carroll County largely written by women, feature LGBTQIA+ characters," Capitol News Service (Oct. 12, 2023), available at <https://cnsmaryland.org/2023/10/12/challenged-books-in-carroll-county-largely-written-by-women-feature-lgbtqia-characters/#:~:text=The%20Carroll%20County%20chapter%20of,group%20uses%20for%20reviewing%20books.>

³ The removals were the result of book challenges brought by members of a group that "opposes LGBTQ+ and racially inclusive school curriculum." See Griffith, Kristen, supra n. 1 (quoting the Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/moms-liberty>).

⁴ Revised Policy IIAA is available at <https://share.carrollk12.org/sites/BoardDocs/BoardMeetings/2024/01-10-2024/Attachments/6.c/Approval%20of%20Revisions%20to%20Board%20Policy%20IIAA%20-%20Selection%20Evaluation%20and%20Adoption%20of%20Instructional%20Materials.pdf>

policies.⁵ They must either go along with the censorship that is happening or face retaliation. One media specialist has already been reassigned for this reason.⁶ When media specialists are punished for doing their jobs, it is ultimately our children who pay the price. My children are already seeing excellent teachers leave the county due to draconian, toxic policies; I fear that we will lose more media specialists as well.

Some of the books that are now banned from school shelves were ones I read as a student and that had a profound impact on me. My children are now denied the same opportunity due to censorship and an extremist group that peddles fear and misinformation. If this group dislikes certain books on school shelves, they can decline to let their children read them. However, they should not be able to dictate such decisions for *all* children.

I hope we can demonstrate that Maryland is willing to stand up for intellectual freedom and the right to read.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB 0785.

⁵ Letter from The Maryland Association of School Libraries, The Maryland Library Association, and Citizens for Maryland Libraries to the Board and Superintendent McCabe, Sept. 13, 2023, available at https://www.mdlib.org/blog_home.asp?Display=67 (citing Appendix J, available at <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1694609421/carrollk12org/oloqu319cod67q1dsxql/SelectionEvaluationAdoptionofInstructionalMaterials-August2023.pdf>).

⁶ See testimony of Dana C. Jones before the Maryland General Assembly Ways and Means Committee, February 21, 2024, recording available at https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/Committees/Media/false?cmte=w%26m&clip=WAM_2_21_2024_meeting_1&ys=2024rs (at the 5:06:09 mark)