

Opposition (UNF) to House Bill 0282
Emily Rosenthal
103 East Mount Royal Avenue Apt 507, Baltimore, MD 21202
ekrosenthalart@gmail.com

My name is Emily Rosenthal and I am a Marylander from Baltimore City, an author and illustrator of stories for children, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community who is opposed to HB0282. I am a member of Authors Against Book Bans, which also opposes this legislation.

This bill promotes the censorship of books and other materials in schools. Under the guise of “protecting children,” it will actually undermine students’ ability to learn about the world in all its complexity in a safe, educational environment. Students have a freedom to read, and there is a deep educational, social, and fiscal cost to book banning.

According to PEN America, over 10,000 books were banned in the 2023-2024 school year, and under laws and bans targeting “sexual content,” as HB0282 also does, books with LGBTQ+ characters or themes, romances, and books about sexual assault or abuse were heavily targeted. Similarly, books about race or racism and featuring characters of color were heavily targeted.

As Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop said in her landmark 1990 essay “Mirrors, Windows, & Sliding Glass Doors,” “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience.” Bills like HB0282 leave the doors wide-open to censor large swaths of the human experience- as noted, particularly those of LGBTQ+ people and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

According to the Trevor Project’s 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People, “Nearly 2 in 3 LGBTQ young people said that hearing about potential state or local laws banning people from discussing LGBTQ people at school made their mental health a lot worse.” When we ban LGBTQ+ books from schools, we send a clear message to LGBTQ+ children that they are not welcome here. This not only affects LGBTQ+ children, but their peers, normalizing bullying and othering vulnerable students. In that same Trevor Project survey from 2023, 53% of LGBTQ youth reported that they were “verbally harassed because people thought [they were] LGBTQ.”

I was queer child who did not have access to literature featuring LGBTQ characters or themes. This led to confusion about myself and my identity, isolation from my peers, and mental health issues, including an eating disorder. I witnessed bullying as early as elementary school towards anyone assumed to be LGBTQ. We were not protected by the censorship of LGBTQ existence, and children today aren’t either.

Now as a storyteller for children and young adults, it is my goal to create stories that not only allow children to see themselves and their families’ experiences, but are windows so children can understand the experiences of others. Author Judy Blume, whose books have been the

target of bans since their publications, said this on reading one of the most banned books in the nation, *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe: “This young person is telling me how they came to be what they are today... And I learned a lot, and became even more empathetic. That’s what books are all about.”

The fiscal cost of book bans is well documented. In 2023, POLITICO reported that book bans and increased scrutiny over what children read was costing Florida’s school districts “between \$34,000 to \$135,000 annually.” In 2023, the Utah Legislature’s Interim Education Committee found that one Utah school district had spent \$20,000 to review challenged materials in 2022 as a direct result of HB374 “the Sensitive Materials in Schools Bill.” This is a small sampling of the exorbitant financial costs to school districts as a result of book bans, challenges, and bills like HB0282, which feed books bans. The time, energy, and potential outsourcing it takes to review challenged books and make determinations is the cause of these costs.

The result: schools lose precious money and time that could be going to improving the lives of students and ensuring schools have modern, up-to-date resources.

I stand here today in opposition to a bill that will censor marginalized people’s experiences, limit students’ education and understanding of the world, and that is oppositional to empathy. Maryland’s Freedom to Read Act states, “a library should not prohibit or remove material from its catalogue because of partisan, ideological, or religious disapproval.” This was a huge step forward in fighting censorship in our state. Let’s not go backwards.

Thank you for your time.