

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"Protecting Kids: Combating Graphic, Explicit Content in School Libraries"

Thursday, October 19, 2023 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Chair Bean. And thank you to our witnesses.

More than seven months ago, our Republican colleagues sat in this hearing room and vehemently denied any interest in addressing the banning of books.

Then House Republicans passed a bill they said was about parental rights but in fact should be called the *Politics Over Parents Act* (H.R. 5); because it is essentially a blueprint for book banning. Now, today, the majority is holding a hearing specifically about what books should or should not be allowed in school libraries. And I'll note that this is the U.S. Congress, not a school board meeting.

Sadly, this far-right conservative movement is having profound real-life effect on children, on educators, and importantly on school librarians. Research shows that as of 2021, more than 4 million students had their freedom to read curtailed because of book bans. That includes students across more than 5,000 schools, 138 school districts, in 32 states. Specifically, PEN America found that 41 percent of banned content focuses on LGBTQI+ themes, protagonists, or characters, 40 percent focuses on characters of color. Rates of teachers citing burnout and what they feel are unsafe working conditions as a reason for leaving the profession have skyrocketed, at least seven states have passed draconian laws in the past two years subjecting school librarians to years of imprisonment and fines for providing books deemed to be explicit, obscene, or harmful.

That's incarceration.

These censorship laws are being enacted by extreme MAGA politicians under the pretext of parental rights—when in reality—it's a coordinated, and apparently well-funded, vocal minority of parents and conservative organizations pushing their own personal agenda on others.

We can all agree that books in school libraries should be age appropriate. And we all used to agree that the federal government should not dictate school curricula or what books are in school libraries. Regrettably, it seems that my Republican colleagues have abandoned these previously shared values – although I do note that Superintendent Degenfelder expressly says in her testimony “So how do we solve this issue? It certainly should not be up to the federal government.”

A book's age appropriateness and its ability to tell challenging, culturally significant stories representing diverse perspectives, those are not mutually exclusive. For example, *The Hate U Give* is a powerful novel taught in middle and high schools about a young Black girl who finds her voice and stands up for racial justice as she grapples with the trauma of witnessing her friend being murdered by police officers. This important book elevates Black voices and centers a historic civil rights struggle, but it has been challenged by Republican officials and parents in at least four states.

I want to remind my colleagues that it is students who are most affected by these policies. In 1982, a group of students stood up for their rights and they challenged the constitutionality of book bans. The case, *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*, went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which considered whether a local school board's decision to prohibit certain books from its junior high and high school libraries because of their content violated the First Amendment's free speech safeguards. The Court decided that "local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books."

I'm concerned that my colleagues are waging these culture wars in part to undermine our public education system and try to justify defunding public schools and libraries; preferring instead to funnel public dollars into low-quality, private voucher programs.

And we've seen that before.

Thankfully, under President Biden's leadership, the Department of Education is using its legal authority under the Civil Rights Act to fight book bans in schools, including in Texas and Georgia, and is working to protect the civil rights of students.

Well, we don't have students testifying today, Mr. Chairman, but their voices should be heard. And so, I'm just going to share just a few, and these are students from across the country. This is from a New York Times article last year titled *What Students Are Saying About Banning Books From School Libraries*:

— Deeya from Arkansas [said](#): "*Hiding away things that make us uncomfortable doesn't make them go away. Even if we don't talk about it, racism, sexual assault, genocide, and many other complex issues will still exist. We have to face the discomfort to keep it from happening again. While those supporting the book-banning movement claim that it's an issue of parental rights, it's really an issue of people trying to ban things that make them uncomfortable.*"

Jason from Maine said: "*As a teenager I am still trying to find my way in this world; I want to know as many other viewpoints as possible so that I know my thoughts are my own and not just a product of a limited amount of information. trying to force a community to get rid of a book is a way of forcing one's beliefs on an entire community.*"

And — Jordan, from Norwood High school [said](#): "*Reading the article [about book banning] and these comments just makes me think - Jeez, the fact these books are being challenged shows how much some people need education on the subjects of them.*"

Finally, Democrats on this Subcommittee will continue to reiterate our focus during each hearing this Congress: let's work together on important issues that will help our students succeed. According to the American Library Association, 2.5 million students nationwide are enrolled in school districts where there are no school libraries. At a time when many students are not proficient in reading and still struggling with literacy, we should focus on supporting librarians and educators and their work to help every student read and feel safe and welcome in their school.

Thank you, again, Mr. Chairman. And I look forward to the discussion.