

House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee
Hearing on “Free Speech Under Attack: Book Bans and Academic Censorship”
Thursday, April 7, 2022
Written Testimony of Samantha Hull

Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Mace, and members of the subcommittee thank you for this opportunity to offer this written testimony on such an important issue.

Books have been questioned, challenged, and banned at record rates this school year. Administrators often made hasty decisions. School board members jumped to conclusions based on out-of-context excerpts. Librarians scrambled to play catch up and fight for their students' rights.

When books are removed, communities lose the voice that that book represents. Measuring the damage of lost voices is daunting and longitudinal. What we *can* measure are the soaring rates of mental health disorders in adolescents. Many can directly correlate the teen mental health crisis to feelings of discontent, loneliness, and lack of belonging. These are exactly the feelings that arise when we believe we are alone in what we are experiencing—and these feelings can be especially brutal and isolating in adolescents.

Imagine a generation of students that isn't bogged down by oppression, by trying to figure out how they fit into society or where they belong but instead can use their cognitive abilities to learn and apply content and skills to authentic situations and truly unite us in ways that we can't even imagine. After all, history has shown us that problems are often not solved by the same minds who caused the problem.

The ability to learn about and appreciate the diversity of human experience, perspective, and opinion is crucial to gaining a sense of belonging. We can gain this ability through our access to books. This is why a singular reaction to a book should never result in immediate removal of that resource but instead, be the basis for a conversation to understand the purpose of a library and the support and resources librarians offer. If a student reacts strongly to a book, it can be the start of a conversation with their family or trusted adult about the topic that caused the reaction.

During the eight years I've been a librarian, I have seen the publishing industry recognize a need among adolescents for books representing a spectrum of thought and experience. Authors responded and their books have made a difference in our kids' well-being, ability to think more broadly, be more innovative, be empathetic, and be able to recognize the greater good. We see this in the many students who are standing up for what they believe in. Those students realized early in life that they have a voice and that their voice matters.

Banning books is no way to foster our students' curiosity, desire to learn, faith in themselves, or faith in our democracy. We know this instinctively, and perhaps this is why they are not more common. The last time reported book challenges were this widespread was in the 1980s. History is about to repeat itself if we don't take a stand and truly consider what first amendment rights look like for our students, and for our educators.

The library is not only where students go for access to information that can ease their sense of isolation and receive help from experienced librarians in finding information. It is also the place students go when their locker is jammed or when practice was canceled. It's the place they feel safe.

Feeling safe, however, is not the same as always feeling comfortable. I often tell my students and my own children that growth doesn't necessarily happen when we're comfortable. It definitely will not occur when we are stagnant or when we're uninterested and we accept the way things have always been done. Growth is uncomfortable, but it builds grit and determination.

Even before children realize they're growing, before they can recognize the feeling of being outside their comfort zone as a bad thing, through reading, children have often had many experiences and exposure to characters who have faced challenges. Beyond developing language skills and critical thinking skills, children's literature provides a wider perspective on their world and serves to help students better understand themselves and others around them. Further, inclusive literature gives children an opportunity to start building empathy by offering an opportunity to see similarities in characters who have different characteristics or backgrounds.

I recently asked my five-year-old son why books are important. Here is what he told me: "The books are important because they help me learn because I can see new words, I can meet new people and I can go to places I haven't been. They teach us to solve problems. Books are important."

I posed the same question to my high school students. They said books are an escape, sometimes offering a reality much different than the one we're living in. They told me: "The books make me feel like I'm not alone. The books provide information that's reliable."

When we're in an environment that fosters open-minded communication, any discomfort that arises from what we read is outweighed by the possibility of learning. If the book makes you uncomfortable, it's time to consider what it might be trying to teach you and what you are fighting so hard not to learn.

Open-minded communication is not fostered when we start making individual, monolithic or one-sided decisions, especially without trained librarians' input, about books based on

out-of-context readings. When we take this road, we are limiting growth, we are stifling progress, and we are acting in the most undemocratic way possible. Adhering to loud minority viewpoints and not making space for all voices to be heard is not progress. Librarians urge everyone to take a minute to consider why a book or resource makes us uncomfortable, what it might be trying to teach us or what we are resisting to learn. While we are willing to fight, and those fights are always worth it, they take time. They take energy and, most importantly, they remove us from our students, from our classes, and from our libraries. They often close the doors to the sanctuary so many students find in our space. But librarians are in it for the long game. We fight with courage in our hearts to balance the shelves so students can find what they need, when they need it and have a safe place to do so. And if we don't have the answers, we'll help them find someone who does. This is crucial in supporting and nurturing all students.

For a while, our fights were lonely. It seemed like everything was happening behind closed doors. Many of us have found the strength and space to speak out on the injustices of self-censoring and outright book banning. Since those brave moments, the army has grown. Parents, students, community members, public librarians, store owners, authors, lawyers, teachers, and local politicians have embraced the discomfort and joined the fight.

Librarians have always been dedicated to keeping our curated collections as balanced as possible, and during these times, we have become even more devoted to this principle. .

The future of our democracy hinges on the ability of our youth to have access to fully representative resources, curated by librarians and teachers with the education, expertise, and experience to handle this work. Without institutions that are curated by professionals to encapsulate the wide range of historical perspectives, we have no history. Without a location in our schools that is staffed by trained librarians, we have lackluster resources and ill-informed students. Without safe places to read, think, and discuss, we have no future. School librarians have been working to stock their shelves with authentic books that provoke curiosity about the world our students live in. Our world's problem solvers are ever curious. It's through curiosity that knowledge is generated and innovation occurs.

We librarians know firsthand that students—our world's problem solvers—are ever curious. It is our duty to encourage them in their quest for understanding and their struggle to make sense of the world and their place in it. Through their curiosity, knowledge is generated and innovation occurs. That is growth. That is progress. That is democracy.