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Shreya Mehta is a senior at Hanford High School in Eastern Washington State who serves as ASB and equity club president. She is a representative on her superintendent's DEI work group and student voice council, as well as a three year member of the Association of Washington Student Leaders council and equity cohort. Shreya is a strong proponent for equitable and inclusive education policy at all levels of the system having worked with various Washington stakeholder groups and is an active member of her school book club and poetry club.

Testimony:

Hi, my name is Shreya Mehta.

I'm a senior this year at Hanford High School, a public school in Eastern Washington State. I want to start off by thanking the subcommittee for giving me the opportunity to testify today. It's an honor to be representing the students in our country both as an organizer and as a book lover.

My district has had minimal outward book challenges, but the internal damages the culture of censorship of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ voices and stories has caused is immense. I believe the rampant censorship is affecting even more districts than we think and supporting bullying of marginalized students around the country.

The rise in book bans has created so much fear that new books and entire classes centering diverse perspectives have been stopped in their tracks. I've spoken personally with educators who have been coerced into putting away books with LGBTQ+ content or racial equity content.

The politicized book bans have wreaked havoc on the public education reform efforts and historically marginalized students are the collateral damage.

By not acting strongly against censorship and outspokenly defending students' intellectual freedom we are proving that we haven't learned from our country's past mistakes when it came to moral panic, exclusion, and discrimination.

I'm in the crossfire. Just a week ago I went to a school board meeting where a man spoke out against "homosexual" teaching and a woman spoke out against "gender equality books". The cries for censorship are thinly veiled racist/sexist/homophobic political

statements that impede a student's right to intellectual freedom and to embrace their individual identities.

I don't see censorship as a form of bullying. The same adults who scream for bans are the ones who call my transgender friends "things" and "threats".

It's un-American and incredibly discriminatory that censorship is being used to stop stories of this historically marginalized group, when that same population of LGBTQ+ youth have such high suicide attempt rates.

Is it really a question as to why? We're forcing these students to endure this silencing and invisibility of their stories.

My city isn't the most accepting or progressive, as you can probably tell by the homogenous curriculum I described. But that makes it even more important that students have options when they choose what to read from the school library.

As an experiment for the subcommittee I counted the amount of times I heard the f-slur in the hallway at school in a day the Thursday before spring break, so a week ago now...15 uses in 30 minutes worth of passing periods, one instance of bullying every 2 minutes, shorter than this testimony. I think that is learned hatred and entirely preventable.

We can't solve bullying without stopping censorship. How else will students learn to empathize with people even if they don't agree with them?

One parent's opinion on what is the appropriate book for their child shouldn't impede on a different parent's. A loud minority can't be responsible for the cheapening of a young American's first amendment rights.

I think words have power, especially when it comes to uniting us and strengthening our democracy. We have differences and disagreements, but public schools shouldn't take sides, they should offer multiple points of view such that all students can find those windows and mirrors. Political polarization shouldn't and mustn't dictate our education.

Please support student intellectual freedom and the fact that it's not politicians, but librarians and educators in partnership with the students they serve, who are the best suited and trained to cultivate a collection of books that age-appropriately serve their diverse student body's.

Again, thank you to the subcommittee for amplifying student voices today.