

Submitter: Gregg Heacock
On Behalf Of: Myself
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1098

I urge you to support SB 1098 and offer the following history to explain why this bill is so important right now!

The biggest benefit of teaching English for 32 years mostly in schools where my students were predominantly Spanish-speaking students or Black students with some from Belize, Jamaica, and Nigeria, was that I was able to discover books I had never read. Mid-career, I was fortunate to have been given funds to purchase young adult novels for each English teachers in class library for students to read as part of the school's decision to dedicate a portion of classroom time to Silent Sustained Reading.

What a pleasure it was to discover the works of Walter Dean Myers, Rob Thomas, Lois Lowry, Jack Gantos, Olivia Butler, Gary Paulsen, Carl Deuker, Beverly Cleary, Chris Crutcher, Laurie Halse Anderson, E. B. White, Rick Riordan, Judy Blume, Orson Scott Card, and Jerry Spinelli, covering issues including gang violence, rape, suicide, child abuse, racism, sexual identity, bullying, and battling space aliens.

Ironically, I was on the title selection committee for the Oregon Battle of the Books the year before COVID hit the political fan encouraging parents to meet in Facebook groups to express their dissatisfaction with how Oregon school districts were handling this crisis. Some groups morphed into Moms for Liberty, funded by groups that sought public funding for private education. That is when Laura Ingraham of the Fox News Network invited two Moms for Liberty candidates running for seats on the Bend-La Pine school board. as guests for her show. These candidates said they objected the district's advancing policies of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion because it made white students feel uncomfortable. Laura Ingraham told them this sounded very much like this district was advocating Critical Race Theory, or CTR, terms unspoken on camera before by these candidates appeared—an historic moment—and the candidates politely agreed that was so.

Though these candidates lost by large margins, members of Moms for Liberty filled school board meetings in various districts around the state, disrupting proceedings and causing many districts to cut themselves off from facing the public in this manner. That has undermined efforts to be responsive to community concerns. Those who attacked public education at this time also called for the banning of books—both in libraries and in schools.

This was the year when the Oregon Battle of the Books title selection committee for grades 3-5 selected Alex Gino's "George" as one of 16 books teams members could

select among when competing in regional and state tournaments taking place just before the 2021 special election for school board. “George,” now published under the title of “Melissa,” was a first-person account of a transgender youth who has been told “he” can’t play the role of Charlotte in “Charlotte’s Web,” because that is a girl’s part. When her best friend conspires with other friends to sneak Melissa into “Charlotte’s” costume and she is applauded for her performance, she realizes she doesn’t need to take more drastic steps to be herself.

Understanding the theme of this book wasn’t a priority for those who physically attacked my local Bend librarian, who had been asked to head up the Prineville Library after giving birth to her first child. However, other consequences were lasting. When I nominated the favorite book of my disabled readers whose struggles were the same as the main character’s, its title—There’s a Boy in the Girls Bathroom—meant that the time was not right to risk its inclusion.

Supporting SB 1098, for me, is personal. Much money has been wasted trying to raise test scores in reading. School districts would do better purchasing a wide variety of engaging books that offer students an opportunity to use reading to explore the world inside them and around them, helping imagine a future worth creating for themselves and others to share. It’s about freedom of choice!