

Dear Chair Frederick, Vice-Chair Weber, and Committee Members:

My name is Seth Johnstone, I work at Basic Rights Oregon, a long standing LGBTQIA2S+ policy and rights organization.

I am here in support of SB1098 which defends against censorship in schools and libraries, addresses harassment and threats against libraries and the profession, and applies parameters for book challenges.

Basic Rights Oregon was formed in 1996 out of community responses to anti-gay ballot measures and proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation at the time. One of those was Oregon Ballot Measure 9, a ballot initiative that would have amended the Oregon Constitution to prohibit the recognition of sexual orientation and to label homosexuality as abnormal. The measure was defeated by voters. It would have required schools to teach that homosexuality was abnormal and perverse. It would have removed the materials students had access to. This was defeated by voters but remains a history of our organization.

SB1098 is necessary because book challenges, bans, and harassment of librarians has been happening across our state in an unregulated manner per district for the last few years at an alarmingly increasing rate, targeting specifically books featuring LGBTQ+ and content or texts authors and about folks of color. The efforts to ban books at the school board level by small groups use words like “appropriateness”, which is just coded language that when you review the books suggested just means LGBTQ+ content or characters because they don’t believe we should exist or be known about. There are cases of individuals from out of district and out of state sending book lists of tons of books, most LGBTQ+ or about folks of color in content or authorship to districts around our state requesting their removal at school boards. In 2024, the most common complaints against the books stated that they “included the presence of stories of people who are two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or other identities related to sexual orientation or gender identity.” We must differentiate between the existence of LGBTQ+ people and negative stereotype associations. LGBTQ+ individuals are appropriate, exist at all ages, are valid, have always existed and will continue to exist. It is time to address these book bans, and the process statewide to clearly prohibit discrimination that has been taking place.

The bill also provides much-needed support for library professionals who have increasingly found themselves targets of harassment and defamation. In recent years, there has been a disturbing rise in attempts to intimidate and vilify librarians for simply doing their jobs. Librarians are being harassed for not pulling books from the shelf immediately, while are

simply waiting for due process to occur and a book review to take place by a reviewing committee. We've also seen little support from our state for schools without a librarian when book challenges happen.

This bill affirms and protects students' access to materials in school libraries, guarding against attempts to restrict access to books and information based on subjective personal beliefs. This bill emphasizes that anti-discrimination must be a core value in Oregon schools. It enhances this vision by protecting the rights of all individuals to access diverse materials. Parents still have the right to make decisions about what their individual child reads. Many other states have already passed bills that prohibit book bans in the state and I encourage Oregon to join.

I urge the committee to vote yes on SB1098 to move this bill forward as it will strengthen the rights of our students and support our librarians and those overseeing educational books and materials in our state.