

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

My name is Finn Johnson, and I am a PhD candidate and a university instructor here in Oregon. I am here today to encourage you to support Senate Bill 1098, a critical bill aimed at safeguarding students from discriminatory book bans and educational censorship in K-12 schools.

As a teacher, my primary responsibility is to nurture, guide, and educate the next generation of professionals. Unfortunately, in recent years, many of my students have come to me with accounts of harm they encountered in high school due to recent book bans, the censorship of educational materials or discussions of race, sexuality, and gender identity, as well as the horrific impacts of anti-LGBTQIA+, anti-DEI, and parental rights in education bills. The enforcement of these policies has hindered my student's ability to access diverse perspectives they are entitled to as a part of their K-12 education.

I was raised in the southern United States in a conservative city where my exposure to educational materials regarding race, gender identity, sexuality, and ability were severely restricted. The schools I attended actively suppressed information about the history of enslavement, racial dynamics in the South, and any mention of BIPOC, women's, or LGBTQIA+ civil rights movements. Although this information was not provided in the classroom, I sought it out independently through books and films in local and school libraries. Despite the attempts of my educators to limit my understanding of historical oppression, I was, and still am, a voracious reader, and I furtively sought out books and media that would expand my own worldview. I have made it to the highest level of education one can achieve, and I firmly believe that I would not be in this position had I not actively sought out educational materials on my own. If book bans and educational censorship are to proceed, students' access to these materials would be severely restricted.

During the 2022-2023 school year, PEN America documented over 3,300 cases of individual book bans in the United States. These book bans are not isolated incidents. The same extremist groups perpetuating book bans and parental rights in education bills are a part of a larger and more insidious decades-old movement with an agenda that began with the opposition to ending school segregation in the U.S. As times changed, so have their targets, some of which included abortion rights, HIV/AIDS, discrimination protections for women, LGBTQIA people, and immigrants, affirmative action, and immigration law. It is crucial to understand that book banning and educational censorship are not disconnected from broader attempts to reshape United States' history through a deeply authoritarian lens.

My doctoral research is primarily centered around anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in the United States. I'd like to provide you all with a specific example of harm that can come from enacting discriminatory book bans and curriculum restrictions. The Washington Post's 2023 analysis of

yearly anti-LGBTQ hate crimes in K-12 schools identified that in states with anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, there has been a 351% increase in K-12 hate crimes since 2019. Looking at these sobering statistics, the argument that this is about “protecting children” loses validity. Protecting children means protecting all children from harm.

The right to free speech is a fundamental aspect of our democracy. Courts have ruled that the first amendment protects a student’s right to learn and speak about a wide range of ideas, and that students do not lose this right while at school. Participating in a democracy necessitates the free-flowing exchange of varying viewpoints. Any attempt to censor or limit access to information regarding historically marginalized groups should be viewed as an attempt to practice revisionist history. When books or curricula are banned simply because they contain information about any identity group other than white, able bodied, Christian, heterosexual, and cisgender people, we are teaching children that exclusion based on any other identity characteristic is acceptable. Children who hold intersecting marginal identities do not deserve to feel as if their identities and communities’ history are incompatible with K-12 education.

SB 1098 is a vital piece of legislation that will protect students from highly discriminatory book bans and educational censorship in K-12 schools. It is a critical step towards ensuring that students in Oregon receive an equitable, socially-just, and well-rounded education. I urge you to support SB 1098 and protect the fundamental right of all children to receive an education free from bias and exclusion.