

March 4, 2025

RE: Vote Yes on SB1098

Chair Frederick, Co-Chair Weber, and members of the committee:

My name is Mackenzie Isaak from La Grande, Oregon, and I am writing to urge you to support Senate Bill 1098, which will prohibit discrimination based on the race, religion, ability, country of origin, sexuality, or gender of the individuals featured in the content of educational and library materials in K-12 public schools in Oregon.

In Oregon, especially rural Oregon, we have seen countless efforts to ban books that feature LGBTQIA2S+, Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color, and restrict access for students to understand the positive contributions of individuals of marginalized identities who have contributed to our society. This bill creates a statewide standard ensuring freedom of information both to users of that information, as well as providers of that information, for example librarians and educators. It also ensures students have access to accurate and representative information about their histories, communities, and selves.

As a children's librarian living and working in a deeply conservative area of the state, I can attest to the fact that not many people realize that to have the title of professional librarian, one must have adequate education. I received my Master's in Library and Information Science (MLIS) from the University of Washington Information School, widely known as one of the best, most rigorous American Library Association-accredited MLIS programs in the United States. While attending this three-year graduate program, I received an enormous amount of training, education, and feedback from classmates, professors, colleagues, and experts in the field. I studied every layer of librarianship, including effective collection development and the sanctity of intellectual freedom and access to information. It cannot be stressed enough that professionally educated and trained librarians know what they are doing. They have the resources, training, background, and knowledge to make appropriate and intelligent decisions in a professional capacity. We must trust them to use their expertise to acquire and provide the best, most valuable and diverse materials available. We cannot allow blatantly biased and untrained individuals to make decisions for our kids, our schools, and/or our libraries. When we do, we are not trusting the professionals to do their job, which is *literally* developing and maintaining a library collection.

When we allow books to be challenged or banned, we are not only failing our professional librarians, we are failing the children who ultimately pay the price for these often politically motivated stunts. I do not work in a public school, but I do work in a

public library in a small, rural community. I recently had an incensed grandfather confront me with a picture book that he wanted removed from the juvenile collection immediately. The book is called *A is for Activist* by Innosanto Nagara and the grandfather argued that he should get a say in what books are allowed in the library because he is a taxpayer (an extremely popular argument). It turned out that his issue with this particular book was the word “Zapatistas” because he did not know what it meant. He was also uncomfortable with the image on the page, which was an illustration of a person wearing a head and face covering where only their eyes were visible. The book, which he repeatedly referred to as “garbage,” was retained and I was able to provide context for the word and the image. I share this anecdote because some challenges are as trivial as the challenger refusing to Google a word they are unfamiliar with. *That* is how frivolous and dangerous these challenges and bans have become.

As a children’s librarian with an MLIS, part of my job is to select and purchase books for my library’s juvenile collection. I use multiple resources to aid in this process and it is always my goal to represent as many communities and views as possible. I cannot adequately express to you how important it is for children to see themselves and their families and experiences in children’s picture books and other literature. This applies to so much more than race and sexuality. Removing or prohibiting the purchase of books that represent a “controversial” group is detrimental to the development and education of children from all groups and communities. It does all children a major disservice as it prevents them from understanding the world around them, which ultimately keeps them from experiencing empathy. Raising children to not feel or experience empathy for other people is one of the most negligent and harmful things we can do as a society. Allowing such censorship is a slippery slope since what is considered to be controversial changes and evolves over time. There is no guarantee that those who seek to ban and remove books will stop at race and sexuality. All topics or groups that these challengers disagree with are fair game. We must act swiftly to prevent this abuse of power from taking place in our public schools.

I will leave you with this personal experience that speaks to the importance of representation: Every year I put on a Santa Storytime in which a local couple comes to my Christmas Storytime dressed as Santa and Mrs. Claus. They sit and take pictures with all the kids and it is always a merry time. Last December one of my regular patrons saw the Santa Storytime advertisement and she mentioned that she’d be attending. She then asked me if I knew of a Black Santa in the area because her young Black son was convinced that Santa wouldn’t bring him presents because Santa is white and he doesn’t look like him. This bright, kind kindergartener had never seen a Black Santa before and he had come to the conclusion that he didn’t matter to Santa as much as the other kids in his community, who are predominantly white. Kids are far more perceptive than we give them credit for and the consequences can be devastating. Children know

when they are not valued or represented. They know when they are seen as different or less than, even if they don't quite understand why. They notice that of the 100+ Christmas books in the library collection, only two depict Santa as a race other than white. The day after I spoke with this patron I sent her information for a Black Santa event in Portland and I purchased as many picture books as I could find that featured Black Santas. The things we do and say matter. The choices we make matter. Diversity matters. The books we buy and share matter. It's as simple as a young Black boy experiencing joy and validation when seeing a Santa that looks like him for the very first time.

Senate Bill 1098 protects students' rights to see themselves represented in the books, materials, and classrooms they learn from and to learn about diverse communities and people. It also protects professional librarians who are just trying to do their jobs.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my story today. I urge you to vote Yes to support and advance Senate Bill 1098.

Respectfully,

Mackenzie Isaak, MLIS