

Submitter: Robert Withnell
On Behalf Of: PROTECT STUDENTS FROM CENSORSHIP
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure: SB1583

Dear Oregon Lawmakers,

I am submitting written testimony to support SB 1583 and share why we must protect students' rights to read, learn, and share ideas – free from discriminatory censorship.

Our schools are the most welcoming and effective when students see their identities and experiences reflected in their schools, books, and learning materials, and when students have access to the histories and stories of all the diverse people and communities that make up our country and world.

Unfortunately, in Oregon and across the country, a vocal but small number of people with fringe views have amounted record numbers of book challenges in the last few years. A Washington Post analysis determined that 60% of all book challenges across the U.S. in the 2021-2022 school year were initiated by the same 11 people. (link: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/09/28/virginia-frequent-school-book-challenger-spotsylvania/>)

Usually, the books challenged are authored by women, LGBTQ+ people and people of color, and feature race or racism, LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, and sex-related education.

The vast majority of Oregonians and people across the country, however, do not support book bans and censorship:

— Most parents and voters hold librarians in high regard, have confidence in their local libraries' decisions about the books made available, and agree that community libraries do a good job of offering books that represent a variety of viewpoints.

— The majority of public school parents also agree that various types of books should be available in school libraries on an age-appropriate basis — including content about slavery and racism, books for young adults that portray police violence against Black people, and both fiction and non-fiction books about lesbian, gay and transgender individuals.

Book bans and censorship have incredibly harmful impacts on people who teach our youth; authors whose works are targeted; families who want their children in diverse, supportive schools; students who deserve a full and rich education; and all of us.

Indeed, this is an important First Amendment and democracy issue. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1969 that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." According to the high court, freedom of speech includes not just the right to speak but also the right to learn.

I urge you to support our democracy, our youth, and our state's future by voting YES on SB 1583. All of Oregon's children deserve to feel safe, welcomed and represented in their schools. SB 1538 is Oregon's chance to curb oppressive, anti-democratic, and discriminatory acts of censorship and book bans in our public schools.

In summary, censorship is anti-democratic and it leans towards facism. In our democracy, students and young people have a right to access representative, engaging and diverse stories featuring a variety of authors, viewpoints and experiences — even if a vocal minority with fringe views doesn't like it.