

Roger A. Sabbadini, Ph.D.

Date: March 5, 2024
TO: Rep. Julie Fahey, Chair
House Committee on Rules
RE: Testimony in favor of SB 1583A

Dear Rep. Fahey and Committee Members:

I would like to support SB 1583A which “Prohibits discrimination when selecting textbooks, instructional materials, program materials or library books that are used in the public schools of this state.”

Censorship can be a positive device used to guard national security secrets, to prevent a person from inciting others to commit a hate crime, or to undermine the legitimacy of a free and fair election. However, most of the time, censorship is counterproductive and violates tenets of constitutional democracies which protect freedom of the press and guards us against “the retrogradation of reason and information” (Thomas Jefferson). As was true for the great works banned by the Nazi regime and, before that, the Inquisition, the “challenged” books of today are among the greatest modern novels. In censoring these works, students are deprived of great literature and important commentary on social issues. No one should be overly concerned with honest debate in the classroom on controversial issues that face our society. A free society does not deny history. The public school is precisely the venue for students to learn about societal mores through the examination of history and sociology including society’s flaws as well as its triumphs. Classroom debates prepare students to better deal with their challenging futures when they emerge from the cloistered environment of school and face the political and social issues of a complex society. Luckily, most school districts across the country do not censure works of literature that have appeared either on the Nazi era or the current Office of Intellectual Freedom

list, and our children are provided the opportunity to debate any controversial issues that are raised by reading that literature. Pen America documents that only a small number of school districts are responsible for most of the bans. During six months studied by Pen America in 2022, most of the book bans occurred in 66 school districts in Florida, Missouri, Texas, South Carolina, and Michigan, representing over 600 books banned. The remainder of the nearly 16,000 school districts nation-wide banned only between 1-19 books.

The ambivalence of what is good or bad is uncomfortable to many who would prefer to be soothed by uncomplicated stories rather than confront the random nature of human behavior or the consequences of human transgression. Critics of this modern corpus fail to recognize that the question of moral uncertainty is nothing new and has been a common theme throughout literature beginning with the Greek classics and continuing through Dante, Shakespeare, Hugo, and Dickens. Was Victor Hugo's protagonist Jean Valjean a convicted criminal or a virtuous humanitarian? Maybe he was both and that should be an acceptable view of human redemption.

Sincerely,

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