

Testimony for the introduction and explanation of H.807: a bill for the establishment of library materials collection policies, and reconsideration procedures, that protect intellectual freedom and are in concordance with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Vermont Freedom to Read Statement, and the Library Bill of Rights.

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For reference:

[The First Amendment of the United States Constitution](#)

[The Vermont Freedom to Read Statement](#)

[The American Library Association's Freedom to Read Statement and the Library Bill of Rights](#)

Good Morning to you, Chair Conlon, and my Esteemed Colleagues on the House Education Committee,

The bill that I bring before you today is relatively simple and brief. It was inspired by a wonderful constituent of mine, a long-time resident of Mosquitoville, in Ryegate, who recently retired from her position as the librarian for the Blue Mountain Union School. There, she was well-loved, and now, sorely missed. Nevertheless, she continues to serve her community by mustering the combined might of the Vermont School Library Association, the Vermont Library Association, and the Vermont School Boards Association: these are the organizations that helped me in the crafting of this bill. I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to Beth St. James, of the Vermont Office of Legislative Counsel, for so deftly smithing the bill that I now will explain to you.

I do not need to convince anyone in this room about the mind-expanding power of literacy and how it is the key to unlocking a life-long love of learning and self-improvement. Reading is not just beneficial to an individual's mind: it is the keystone that sustains the very concept of civilization. The ability to find the truth in the words of others, no matter who writes them, is an essential ingredient of our democracy. Not too long ago, I would have thought that the provisions in this bill were superfluous and unnecessary. Never in my lifetime have I seen the concept of intellectual freedom under greater threat than it is now. To be curious about the world in which we live is the most important attribute of a healthy mind, but censorship is the mortal enemy of curiosity.

Protecting the freedom to read whatever one chooses is implicit in the freedom of speech and expression that we affirm as one of our nation's most important defining principles. This idea, enshrined in the First Amendment, has stood at the center of my mind since my earliest memories. As the child of Cuban immigrant, I was always aware

that a corrupted government could attempt to strip my freedoms from me. My family found refuge in the state of Florida where, tragically, the freedom of the mind seems to be facing the greatest threat in our country today. When I was 15 years old, I used to skip lunch to spend the entire period in the library of Hialeah High School. This is how I wound up reading every single book written by the popular astronomer Carl Sagan. In his book *Cosmos*, based on the PBS documentary series of the same name, Mr. Sagan told the history of the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria, in Egypt, by an invading Roman Army. I've also read the legend an ignorant and ignoble Roman general who heated the public baths with the smoldering scrolls looted from the stacks. The accumulated knowledge from the finest minds on three continents, the hard-earned wisdom from centuries of study, was lost in a day. Carl Sagan claimed that this single event led to the period in European history commonly known as the Dark Ages.

For over a thousand years, there was scarcely any progress in science, literature, or the arts on the European continent. Medieval Italians came to believe that a race of giants must have been responsible for the ruined temples in the Roman Forum, for no one there could fathom that mere humans were capable of such astounding feats of architecture. We celebrate the Renaissance that put an end to these benighted times precisely because the literature of the ancients finally found its way back to Western Europe. There is a good reason why we use Arabic numerals in our mathematics, and why science is illuminated with words like almanac, algebra, algorithm, alchemy, and even alcohol. The vast majority of the stars listed in our charts and planetariums carry names like Deneb, Altair, and Betelgeuse. These are Arabic names that were brought westward by the writings of a Persian scholar named Al-Rahman. Why is this the case? It is quite simply because the people of the ancient Middle East did not burn their libraries down!

In some parts of the United States today, we see books being being removed from shelves by the whims of a single disapproving individual. According to a recent analysis by the Washington Post, the vast majority of book bans in our country, out of the thousand studied, were caused by just 11 people. Although 49% of the banned books eventually returned to their shelves, the majority that did not were by or about members of the LGBTQ+ community, or about the concept of race and people of color. Hiding behind the false motive of "protecting children," these recent bans only serve to silence those who belong to groups that have already been historically marginalized in our society. I want Vermont to lead our nation in a better direction, to protect the freedom of the mind as much as we have already protected reproductive freedom and

bodily autonomy. Protecting school libraries from censorship is a crucial step in protecting our children's minds from limitations to their growth and potential.

Preventing the arbitrary banning of books should not be seen as an effort to reduce the rights of parents. The Vermont School Library Association strongly supports a parent's right to guide their own child's reading. If we are to be equitable in the preservation of that right, we must extend that right to *all* parents. This means that a parent has the right to make decisions for their own children, but not for the children of others.

This bill acknowledges the fact that it is possible for a librarian to develop a collection that fails to serve the interests of their community. By mandating the creation of a policy for reconsideration, whether by a school board or another governing body, this bill provides an opportunity for a uniform and thereby legally defensible procedure for changing a library collection that might be judged as "out-of-step" with the community that it serves.

Thank you, Chair Conlon, for affording me the opportunity to speak about this bill. I will now happily answer questions from the committee, to the best of my ability.