



House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs
Vermont General Assembly
2023-2024 Regular Session

April 30, 2024

To the Honorable Chair, Vice-Chair, and Committee Members:

Thank you for conducting a hearing on S.220, as amended, an act relating to the governance and policies of Vermont public libraries. Public and approved independent schools stand to increase protections for their library collections through the adoption of a required library material selection policy and procedures for the reconsideration of materials, which we wholeheartedly endorse.

The Vermont School Library Association believes that language included **specific to school library material selection policies** (originally introduced in H.807) is essential to support Vermont schools. School libraries and public libraries share many similarities, but operationally, have very distinct governance protocols. School boards bear the responsibility for the adoption and implementation of school policy, including those that impact school libraries. After many years of working with the Vermont School Board Association, our organization successfully advocated that the VSBA have a model library material selection policy moved from suggested to recommended. A component of the bill before you now would take this motion to the finish line by having a library material selection policy and procedure for reconsideration be a **required** policy for every public and approved independent school library in the state of Vermont.

In addition, VSLA would like to see all of the school language in the bill stay the same, regardless of any changes made to the public library section, with the exception of the following additions to make it consistent with the public library section:

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Sec. 7a. 16 V.S.A § 1624 should be amended to read:

§ 1624. SCHOOL LIBRARY MATERIAL SELECTION POLICY

(a) Each school board and each approved independent school shall develop, adopt, ensure the enforcement of, and make available in the manner described under subdivision 563(1) of this title a library material selection policy and procedures for the reconsideration of materials. The policy and procedures shall affirm the importance of intellectual freedom and be guided by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the American Library Association's Freedom to Read Statement, Vermont's Freedom to Read Statement, **the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and State laws prohibiting discrimination in places of public accommodation and that reflects Vermont's diverse people and history, including diversity of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, and political beliefs.**

Why does this matter?

It matters because having inclusive and diverse collections is of utmost importance for ensuring equity and accessibility of materials for all of Vermont's students. Book challenges are on the rise across the United States, and Vermont schools are not immune to pressures from individuals and especially national organizations that seek to impinge upon the intellectual freedom of young people by restricting their access to a diverse selection of books and materials. All too often, these books are centered on themes and characters from marginalized communities or are about LGBTQIA+ issues and information, but there are any number of grounds why an individual or organization endorses censorship and the removal - or banning - of a book for all students. These reasons are often grounded in ignorance, fear, or bigotry.

As school librarians, we also understand that our schools are informed by FERPA laws that allow for parents and guardians to view the educational records of their children, including library records. Parents can continue to communicate to their own children and their schools about books they would prefer they not read, but that right does not extend to other people's children. School libraries are one of the most equitable and inclusive spaces in a child's educational journey, where they can interact with and explore a diverse selection of books and materials.

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With many of Vermont school libraries currently operating without an updated library materials selection policy and reconsideration procedure adopted by their school boards, library collections are not protected; thus, neither are school districts. Without a board-approved Policy, books that are deemed offensive or inappropriate can be culled from library shelves without a procedure, an explanation, or record of or accountability of its removal. The policy and procedure in S.220 for school libraries would require reconsideration committees to carefully consider the material in its full context and for its intended audience before making a recommendation to a school board for the retention or removal of any challenged book or material.

In closing, after years of advocacy, we are eager to see this piece of legislation get across the finish line to protect the intellectual freedom for all of Vermont's school children.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Sofferman and Charles Dabritz, co-Presidents of the Vermont School Library Association

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