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“Protecting Kids: Combating Graphic, Explicit Content in School Libraries” Hearing Questions for the Record Responses

Jonathan Friedman, Director of Free Expression and Education Programs,
PEN America

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Rep. Mark DeSaulnier (D-CA)

1. *The books that are appropriate for kindergartners will understandably not be the same as those appropriate for fifth graders, for example, and yet both age groups are found in most elementary schools. And the books appropriate for fifth graders differ from those appropriate for eighth graders, which differ from those appropriate for twelfth graders, etc.*
 - a. *What role, if any, does age appropriateness play in determining what books should be available in school libraries?*

Answer: Most school librarians confront a staggering diversity of readers, whether they serve elementary, middle, or high schools. The task they confront is to stock a library, consistent with a collections development policy, that serves that diversity. That means carrying a range of books on a range of topics, and being able to offer both advanced and remedial readers texts that engage their interests. It also means recognizing, from the outset, that what is appropriate for one student and one family may be different from that which is appropriate for another, but being committed to stocking a library that has materials that are appropriate for all student readers. Librarians must be supported in defining this notion of appropriateness broadly, for efforts to narrow it often serve to cater to one interest rather than the breadth of interests that public schools must serve. At the same time, librarians and media specialists obtain training, expertise, and professional certificates that familiarize them with the worlds of children’s and young adult literature. This helps them to determine what materials might be relevant for readers at different ages and allows them to serve the needs of their communities. School libraries serve the educational process by making knowledge and ideas available, and ensuring that books remain available regardless of the personal or political ideologies of any specific groups or policymakers.

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Rep. Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (D-Northern Mariana Islands)

1. *School Climate-Impact of Book Bans on Fostering Positive Diversity: Today, elementary and secondary schools are comprised of diverse students, teachers, and staff, and a positive school climate is critical for student success. To support this diversity, schools and districts are increasingly working to improve school climate to create a positive learning environment that benefits all students.*
 - a. *Mr. Friedman, how do book bans impact this effort?*
 - b. *Is there a benefit to students having a broad range of books that reflect the diversity that is seen in our nation today?*

Answer A. When we examine the scope of the last two years, books that include diverse characters, primarily characters of color and LGBTQ+ characters, have overwhelmingly been targeted by efforts at censorship. While recent [efforts](#) to diversify books for children and teens has led to [greater visibility in libraries and classrooms](#), ongoing efforts to ban books with historically marginalized identities push against progress, as countless books that include characters with diverse racial, sexual, and gender identities are pulled from school and library shelves.

The impact of these bans on the positive learning for students is immediate and significant.

Answer B. We know that diversity in representation in our stories matters. Students that see themselves on the pages of literature are validated and affirmed. Students that see diversity of identities and experiences build critical empathy skills.

Classrooms and libraries are meant to be places of discussion and inquiry, with cultivated collections that help students learn to grapple with varied, and even controversial, ideas. At its core, today's movement to ban books does not just endanger individual libraries and classrooms; it is putting the very notion of a public education system that prioritizes information sharing, knowledge building, and acceptance and inclusion of all students at risk. It is a threat to the spirit of pluralism that must necessarily underpin our diverse democracy.

Most of all, it is important to remember the books on these lists, the books that are frequently targeted for removal, are often [literary](#)

[classics](#) or [award-winners](#) for their [composition](#) and [representation](#). These are authors with creative, complex and compelling storylines and characters that kids love. As author Grace Lin has [stated](#): “Diverse books are for everyone ... a good story is a good story, multicultural or not.”

Rep. Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (D-VA)

1. *The Bible can be found in many school libraries. While it is a foundational religious text, it may also be read for its literary merit, historical significance, and role in comparative religious studies. And yet, it contains numerous sexually explicit passages.*
 - a. *Are the same individuals or groups that are leading the charge in the recent resurgence of book bans including the Bible on their lists of books to ban based on content?*
 - b. *What happened in the instances when the Bible has been challenged?*
 - c. *What lessons about context can we learn from the continued presence of the Bible in school library collections?*

Answer A: Our research at PEN America suggests that the Bible has been challenged in some districts not by those individuals who have been challenging the great majority of book restrictions, but rather by those opposing the restrictions on literature, who challenge the Bible as a political statement or a form of reprisal. The challenge documentation in these situations usually points out that the Bible is in violation of certain laws and policies, particularly because of its sexually explicit passages.

Answer B: In Florida, the Bible has been challenged repeatedly and the result is the same each time: The school district in which the challenge is filed retains the book, noting that Florida law and Florida Department of Education policies indicate it has significance and value. In the Davis School District in Utah, the King James version of the Bible was [removed](#) from elementary and middle school libraries after a challenge because the review committee found that it violated the “sensitive materials” prohibitions of HB 374. After community outcry, an appeal to the decision, and a discussion by state lawmakers, the district officials decided to retain the Bible after an appeal committee stated that it had significant serious value for minors, which, therefore, outweighed the sexual content in question. Similar decisions have not

been made when it comes to other literary classics which have been removed and prohibited in some school districts because of their sexual content, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.

Answer C: Literature in school libraries cannot be removed based on political grounds or due to an official's disagreement with the viewpoints or other content therein. Further, sexual content in a book does not, in and of itself, make a book 'pornographic' or otherwise without significant value, as the situation in the Davis School District illustrates.

Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-FL)

1. *According to PEN America's reports, the number of book bans has grown significantly in the last couple of years.*
 - a. *In your research, have you found that this can be attributed to a specific reason or phenomenon? Are more individual parents simply speaking out today than before or are new groups, such as Moms for Liberty, playing a role in this?*

Answer: PEN America's ongoing research and analysis point to two influential drivers behind the growth of book bans since 2021: 1) advocacy groups; and 2) state legislation. More and more districts, board members, school administrators, educators, and librarians are facing both community pressure and state legislation that forces their hand when it comes to making books available to students or facing the possibility of adverse consequences. This has left many educators and administrators feeling they have no choice but to remove books because of intimidation or fear of penalty.

In a [September 2022](#) report, PEN America detailed the influence of parent- and community-led advocacy groups in shaping the tone, tenor, and frequency of book bans. At the time, we identified at least 50 groups involved in pushing for book bans at the national, state, and local levels. This included eight groups with national, state, or local chapters. Members of these advocacy groups push for book bans by directly [advocating](#) for book removals through [challenge forms](#) and at [school board meetings](#), sometimes [using](#) provocative rhetoric about "porn in schools" and "indoctrination." These advocacy groups have stoked public anxiety regarding the types of books students can access in classrooms and school libraries.

Three national advocacy groups have been particularly prominent in pushing for book bans: Moms for Liberty, Citizens Defending Freedom, and Parents' Rights in Education. As of the 2022–23 school year, one or more of these three groups operate in 32 of the 33 states represented in the PEN America 22-23 [Index of School Book Bans](#), the only exception being Utah, where another advocacy group, Utah Parents United, plays a similar role in publicly calling on districts to remove certain books from schools.

More granularly, among the 153 districts across the United States that banned a book during the school year, 124, or 81 percent, either are in or adjoin a county that has a chapter or local affiliate of one or more of the three prominent national groups. These districts are where 2,912 book ban cases, or 87 percent of all book bans recorded, occurred in the past school year.

Examining the five states with the highest number of book bans this 2022–23 school year, all have the presence of national advocacy groups, and all but one have passed legislation likely to affect book access in schools. These pressures work in tandem: school leaders, educators, librarians, and school boards report that fear has propelled their efforts to comply with vaguely worded legislation, and this is in part because these bills also strengthen the tools that local advocacy groups can use to challenge books and pressure compliance with their censorious demands.

There is a difference between an individual concerned parent raising a particular issue about their own child, and the nationwide movement that sees challenges to books *en masse*, sometimes by people without children or in situations where neither children nor challengers read the books in challenge. Such is the work of a coordinated campaign to foment outrage about books in schools, which has been mimicked across state lines, at school board meetings and statehouses.

The unfortunate result from this mounting, multifaceted pressure is that the very stories and voices that have been traditionally underrepresented on school shelves are continuing to be removed at ever-increasing rates. Meanwhile, teachers and librarians report being fearful about what books they buy for their libraries, what topics they

teach students about, and what questions from students they answer. All of this is producing a profound chilling effect on public education in some states.