

House of Representatives Committee Hearing  
Written Testimony

Good morning. I am Olivia Pituch. I am a senior at Central York High School, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, an activist, and the secretary and social media advisor of the the Panthers Anti-Racist Union of Central York School District in Pennsylvania.

In late August, an article revealed that the Central York School Board had banned an extensive list of resources including books, articles, movies, and more, all written by BIPOC or LGBTQ+ authors, containing BIPOC or LGBTQ+ characters, or about BIPOC or LGBTQ+ awareness/history. The book list specifically included materials such as *I am Rosa Parks* by Brad Meltzer, *Malala, My Story of Standing Up for Girls' Rights* by Malala Yousafzai and *I am Enough* by Grace Byers, along with many others. All of these resources would help to not only aid BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students in embracing themselves and their identity but would also spread awareness and educate all students on the importance of diversity.

When this list was pushed out as a Book Ban List, I was appalled. Central, being the second most diverse district in the county, prided itself on diversity, but this ban silenced BIPOC voices and frankly announced that their culture and identity were not welcome. With the help of Edha Gupta, the President of PARU, Christina Ellis, the Vice President of PARU, and our amazing advisors, Ben Hodge and Patricia Jackson, we stood up to this act of discrimination.

In the beginning, we organized small peaceful protests that were located outside of the high school, ending fifteen minutes before the school day began. These caught the eye of local Press and News outlets. This was no longer between a few students. Our story, voices, and messages were broadcasted on many local channels and expressed in articles through interviews and coverage of the peaceful protests. Media coverage helped the community

receive 3,000 books from the list to hand out for free to community members and helped two community protests take place.

It's been a hard journey in loving myself. I have been surrounded by amazing people who helped me through and offered advice, friends who were also members of the community. But not everyone is this lucky. Many kids find refuge in going to school and being within an inclusive community. But as education on inclusion slips away, the safe haven does too. I have heard slurs being thrown around, LGBTQ+ kids being made fun of, verbally abused, and more.

Ignorance is real. It is important to teach inclusion and equality. It is important to have representation. I deserve to walk into my school library and find a book about someone like me. Everyone deserves to be able to find themselves without digging through shelves and finding only a few. This is why education on inclusion is important and necessary. Without it, those children who come to school for safety and acceptance will no longer have that safe spot.

Too many kids have attempted suicide, harmed themselves, or been verbally or physically abused for who they are. Too many kids are alone and don't have that safe haven. Books that represent them offer them comfort and open conversations provide that safe place for ALL students. It is important to teach the students inclusion so that they can save a person's life just by showing them compassion and respect. We can't force LGBTQ+ kids into situations where the only time they hear about their community and themselves is when their rights are being debated between students. We have a place in this world and in this community. If I would have had open discussions, representation and education I would have been able to embrace and love myself a lot earlier on. Rather than sitting fearfully with my thoughts and feelings, I would have been able to learn what my feelings mean and that it is *ok* to be me.

Silence is deafening, but these books help to break through the silence and allow children to flourish. Kids need to see themselves, especially portrayed in a positive light. Provide a space where they can celebrate who they are. Give them resources to help them love themselves for who they are. Don't silence the voices that are finally beginning to be heard. Thank you.