



Pennsylvania School Librarians Association

Thank you, members of the Senate Education Committee, for inviting the Pennsylvania School Librarians to testify on Senate Bill 7. First and foremost, this issue has three components: the students' rights to access literary materials, the parents' responsibility to raise their child as they best see fit, and the educators' duty to ensure both of the other components are met. Much of the friction on this issue comes from the question of where the line gets drawn between where the rights to access for students ends and where the responsibilities of the parent begin. It's important to note that this is a perfectly fair and legitimate discussion to be having. We should be concerned with both protecting our student's rights and making sure our parents have every tool available to raise them in the manner that best suits their family.

The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association recognizes that the students right access to voluntary inquiry materials, and that parents need the final word in how their children are raised. Our membership does our best to curate collections that appeal to the students while maintaining a balanced collection with varying perspectives. It is always our hope that our libraries are accessible, relevant, and inviting. We do, however, welcome parent/guardian input to challenge materials that are in school libraries. We support the checks and balances that parents and guardians have if they believe that a particular title does not have a place in our school library. As this conversation continues, we think it is vital to point out that our organization never feels they are above the reconsideration of a title, and would never suggest that the challenge procedures be removed. They are an important instrument of checks and balances to our school libraries.

The bill itself seeks to empower the guardians of students by allowing them to know what material is on the shelves at their school library. This is a practice that all trained, certified school librarians are supportive of and are already doing. It is never the intention of a certified school librarian to hide, deceive, or otherwise prevent a parent from knowing what materials are available for their student to access. The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association is a staunch supporter of parental involvement of their children's education. Parents currently have the right to opt their child out of any materials they do not wish their child to have access to. If a parent wants to restrict access to those materials, a simple conversation with the school librarian, a phone call or email, and that school librarian will honor the parents' request. By keeping this opt-out procedure, schools would avoid the lengthy paper trail that will build up surrounding each school year and still achieve the same result: honoring the request of the parent. The opt-out procedure is more flexible and less prescriptive than an opt-in procedure because it empowers parents to restrict any materials that do not meet the values of their family, rather than the single facet issue that the bill targets.

This procedure of opting out works with parents, as long as parents are willing to communicate with their school librarian. A school librarian will honor any parental request to deny their student to check a book out, regardless of the reason or if there even is a reason given. These reasons could range from a sensitive topic that the family would like to handle within the home, to a traumatic experience that the student

experienced firsthand that the parents/guardians have decided would be best not to have the student accidentally stumble upon while reading a book, to something as strange as the parent not wanting the student to be allowed to check out a book that has a green cover. It doesn't matter what the reason is, if a parent does not want their child to have access to materials, a school librarian is trained to respect and honor that request. In its current form, this bill will not address those needs within the family unit. We are here to provide the educational materials essential to learning and the voluntary materials for students to enjoy as young readers. School librarians are very much open to a conversation on how districts may better educate their parents on the materials in our libraries, we believe the opt-out process functions better as it creates a one-on-one conversation with the students' parents, and it removes an extra step for the school and the school librarian who is already performing the service being requested. Our catalogs are open and accessible to parents, but they need not know specific titles as school librarians have many tools to screen particular topics, titles, and/or authors as the parent/guardian requests.

The tasks that Senate Bill 7 would mandate the school districts to perform would pose an issue in the buildings that have no certified school librarian to do the work. The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association's internal reporting shows that over 50 school districts in the commonwealth do not have a single certified school librarian. Many other districts have part-time librarians or librarians who travel between buildings. The issue with this is that without a dedicated person, professionally trained and educated to do this work, there won't be anyone to take note of who has been opted in or out of which books or who can check out from what collection and to enforce these rules. A certified school librarian in every school building would be necessary for the work being asked for in Senate Bill 7.

The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association understands that at the heart of this issue is students, and everyone's attempt to do what they believe is right for them, whether that's giving them more freedom to access information or giving parents more tools and leverage to guide their own child's materials in collaboration with the school librarian. Our organization stands ready to continue these conversations. We look forward to working with anyone willing to have a discussion on the subject because we are all on the same team, which is team students. We are all protecting the best interest of our future.

Respectfully,

The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association