

BILL: House Bill 785 / Senate Bill 738 Freedom to Read Act

DATE: February 7th, 2024

POSITION: FAVORABLE

COMMITTEE: Ways and Means Committee

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I am submitting this testimony **in FAVOR of HB785 / SB738 Freedom to Read Act** on behalf of GLSEN Maryland, the statewide chapter of GLSEN National, a nonprofit organization centered on creating and sustaining inclusive K-12 education for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) students.

Since 2021, requests to remove books from schools and libraries experienced an enormous surge. Instead of the occasional complaint from a concerned parent, librarians have been facing coordinated challenges to long lists of titles, submitted by organized political groups such as Moms for Liberty. According to research by PEN America (2023), **more than 60% of challenged titles have LGBTQ+ themes, are on topics of race, or both.**

This bill is necessary because **Maryland has not escaped these attempts:** this past school year, Carroll County removed over 50 books, many with LGBTQ+ themes, from shelves. Cecil County put many LGBTQ+ themed books in a restricted “older teen” section. Worcester and Wicomico County are considering similar policies. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Freedom to Read Act would help retain LGBTQ+ themed and other books on school shelves by setting state standards for school library collections. **All children in Maryland public schools deserve to see themselves and their families represented in books in their school libraries, and this includes LGBTQ+ students.**

Offering inclusive reading material improves education outcomes. Children vary in their interests and motivations to read, and diversity in reading materials increases the chances that students will be engaged readers. Children exposed to diverse perspectives and the experiences of others develop stronger critical thinking and reasoning skills, improved empathy, increased ability to perspective-take, and stronger interpersonal skills—all vital educational outcomes for today’s learners.

Offering inclusive reading material in Maryland schools **improves school climate, which benefits all youth.** It is not just LGBTQ+ youth who are the target of anti-LGBTQ+ bullying; heterosexual, cisgender students can also be called anti-gay slurs, teased for being too effeminate or masculine, etc. (Fisher et al., 2012; McCarty-Caplan, 2013). Because access to diverse reading materials reduces stigma and marginalization of LGBTQ+ youth, it leads to improved school climates for *everyone*. LGBTQ+ students whose schools had inclusive curricula also report feeling safer and more accepted (GLSEN, 2019). Similar patterns have been found for Black LGBTQ+ youth (GLSEN, 2020); further, Black LGBTQ+ youth who attend schools with LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum also felt their race or ethnicity was more supported at school (GLSEN, 2020).

It is for these reasons that GLSEN Maryland is in support of **HB785 / SB378 the Freedom to Read Act** and we seek a **FAVORABLE** vote in committee.