



February 13, 2025

Senator Maher, Representative Paris, and Distinguished Members of the Children's Committee,

My name is Maria Bernhey, I am the City Librarian and Library Director of the New Haven Free Public Library and I am here today in support of Senate Bill 1271, which proposes that each school district and public library has policies on library collections, displays and programs as well as what to do if someone objects to something in the library. Requiring these policies would protect and codify both the right to read and the right to petition.

As a five-branch public library system, we currently have an existing public Collection Development policy that includes a Reconsideration process for residents. I believe this policy strengthens and supports our public service work because it provides professional and transparent guidance for selection, strengthens our ability to protect intellectual freedom, and ensure inclusivity of diverse perspectives in our libraries.

Our policy details how we choose materials in accordance with professional guidelines, outlining key criteria our librarians use to make informed decisions about which materials to add, ensuring collections are balanced and align with the educational, cultural, and informational needs of our community.

Libraries are built on the principle that individuals should have access to a wide range of ideas and perspectives, allowing them to think critically and form their own opinions. When these voices or stories are challenged or omitted due to censorship or the practice of soft censorship, which is the indirect restriction of materials, programs, or services, - this undermines the principle of intellectual freedom, a cornerstone of democratic societies.

Clearly outlined policies help safeguard against censorship by establishing objective criteria for material selection, preventing decisions based on political or personal bias.

Reconsideration procedures, or the ability to petition, allows libraries like ours to review and respond consistently and fairly, reinforcing our commitment to intellectual freedom.

Protecting the Freedom To Read is important because library users should be able to visit their library and see themselves reflected in library materials, including displays and programs. This fosters a sense of belonging and validation, especially for marginalized communities.

As a Librarian, I fully respect and support a parent's or caregiver's right to choose what materials their child reads. However, removing items from a library because someone believes another person's child should not read them imposes a singular perspective and undermines the core library principle of providing free and open access to information for all.

Librarians are trained information professionals with a deep love of literature. We have post graduate education and participate in ongoing professional development including readers advisory workshops, specialty committees, and round table discussions to stay knowledgeable on current trends and standards. At our library, we also have multiple bibliographers who focus on their section or collection, and they take immense pride in curating interesting and age-appropriate materials and programs for our libraries.

As a Library Director with experience in children's services, I speak from experience in emphasizing the importance for parents or caregivers to have discussions with their children about what they read because first and foremost it promotes a love of reading. It also opens the door to engage in discussions around what they're reading while providing an opportunity to give context for complex topics.

When parents show interest in what their children read, it reinforces reading as a meaningful and enjoyable activity rather than just a school requirement. Children imitate what they see, and if they see the adults in their lives reading - there is a higher possibility that, that child will become a lifelong reader.

As youth and especially young adults continue to grow through reading, some books may introduce unfamiliar or challenging themes and parents can help their child navigate these topics in an age-appropriate way, ensuring they grasp the broader meaning and context.

The implementation of policies at all public and school policies statewide would ensure collections across Connecticut include a diverse range of perspectives, cultures, and voices, guaranteeing equitable access to inclusive stories for library users of all ages.

I appreciate the opportunity to express support for this Bill. Connecticut has a long history of supporting our school and public libraries, supporting education of our children, and of non-discrimination. I am grateful to the Committee for your attention to this matter and for your time today.

Sincerely,

Maria Bernhey

City Librarian and Director