

Testimony to the Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont on Intellectual Freedom  
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Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Working Group at this special meeting focused on Intellectual Freedom. My testimony concerns “the importance of diverse collections in libraries” and “impacts to the community – and to particular groups of people within the community – when library collections are limited.”

More specifically, I will speak to how these topics relate to the work of educators in our public schools. As noted in the American Library Association’s [press release](#) of March 22nd, it is in our “school libraries, classroom libraries or school curricula” where a majority of recent book challenges have found their targets.

I’ve worked in public schools for the majority of my career, first as a teacher, then as a principal of New York City’s James Baldwin School, and more recently as principal for 10 years at Randolph Union Middle/High School in Vermont, the state where I was born and raised. After more than two decades as a school-based practitioner, I’m now in my second year as Director of Leadership Programs at the Upper Valley Educators Institute (UVEI). UVEI is a small graduate school of education that offers certification programs for people seeking teacher and administrator licenses in Vermont and New Hampshire.

My work is about preparing people to become school leaders, and about how those school leaders support the professional learning of educators at their schools.

We all want our schools to improve, and this involves the ongoing learning of educators. Let us consider how book bans might impact the learning - of educators.

Earlier this year, I taught a class to the principal candidates at UVEI. I gave them choices of texts to read and discuss in small groups, similar to the work I used to do as a principal working with the school faculty.

One text was an essay written by a young person with disabilities, about his experience in elementary, middle and high school. The future school leaders were asked to reflect on how the story connects to their own experiences as students or to students and schools they have known. It is useful for educators - many of whom didn’t struggle in school as students - to read the perspectives of those who have.

A second text was “Indian Camp,” by Ernest Hemingway, a story about a divided society in which a white doctor’s son watches a Native American child be born into the harshest poverty. I asked the educators to imagine both children attend their school - the white doctor’s son and the native american child - and I ask them to consider what our society needs each

child to gain from their schooling. Stories like these can help us see our students and society in new ways.

A third text is by Audre Lorde called "Every Traveler Has One Vermont Poem." In this poem a Vermont boy on a tractor shouts a racial slur at the Black woman passing on the road. A second boy on the tractor watches. I tell the future school leaders that, in their school faculty, there are probably adults who have, at some point in their lives, used a racial slur. There are probably people on their staff who have been bystanders and heard such slurs. There are probably people who have been the target of slurs - maybe racial slurs, maybe slurs that dehumanize other groups. I ask school leaders to consider the diverse backgrounds of their colleagues. I ask, how will you do work with a faculty like this when you are centering matters of equity and democracy in your schools.

Each of these texts - like countless others - offers opportunities for learning, reflection and growth. They raise questions about race, gender, disability, and power. These are matters that come up in the school curriculum. These are matters that come up in our communities.

Whether it's an investigation into a harassment allegation or teaching classes about our nation's past and present - such topics are part of our work, and educators must engage in professional learning and reflection to do that work well. The intellectual freedom to access a rich and varied world of ideas is essential to an educator's learning and to educator's work with students.

Of the authors I mentioned, which of them is most likely to be the target of a book ban request? Audre Lorde identifies as a mother, a Black woman, a poet, a lesbian. Her poetry could be targeted.

The organization that published the essay by the young person with a learning disability also frequently publishes the voices of LGBTQ youth and BIPOC youth. Their resources could be targeted.

Hemingway's stories could be too. In the same anthology where I find "Indian Camp," Hemingway has a story called "The Sea Change," about a woman who tells a man she's leaving him to be with a woman. He has a story called "A Simple Enquiry" about a man propositioning a younger man in a remote military outpost in the alps. He has a story called "Hills Like White Elephants" in which a man and woman discuss abortion.

As Heather McGhee writes in her book, *The Sum of Us*, when a community drains their public pool to limit the access of some people, you end up draining the pool for all. What's true of the segregation or repression of races is true of the segregation or repression stories: some are impacted more gravely, and yet no demographic goes unharmed: the civic and intellectual freedoms of all are eroded.

As I looked to my newsfeed earlier this week, I saw on Monday morning reports about a so-called "[Teen Takeover](#)" of downtown Chicago. According to Fox News and other outlets, there were gunshots, arrests, fights and the destruction of storefronts and cars. Video shows scores of children running about in the streets, fighting each other with fists, climbing on top of vehicles. One racist commentator - with a following of close to 100,000 - called the mostly Black and brown teenagers "human animals." These are middle school and high school students.

Discussing and confronting racist discourse about Black youth is the work of educators. Likewise is it the work of educators to understand the energy and aggression of youth and work to channel it in productive and not destructive directions. Were I in schools this week, I would remind my colleagues that James Baldwin has something to teach us about the energy of youth and the health of our cities and nation.

In his essay, "A Talk To Teachers," he writes of the needs and potential of Black children, and what he says of these children is relevant to others.

"If America is going to become a nation," Baldwin writes, our country must "find a way" to use "the tremendous potential and tremendous energy" of our youth. He then warns that "if this country does not find a way to use that energy, it will be destroyed by that energy." Baldwin is an artist who tells important truths. His books, too, have been banned before. They may be targets again. I don't know what I'd be, myself, without James Baldwin's work as part of my learning as an educator, man, person, US citizen.

Educators need access to the truths of poets and writers of all genres who shine light on who we are as people, as a nation. Agree or disagree with an author, the intellectual freedom to wrestle with their vision and consider their story is essential to the learning and growth of educators, which is essential to our capacity to support the learning of students in a pluralistic democracy.

I have two recommendations for this working group and other entities to consider:

First, Vermont has [proficiency based graduation requirements](#), which align expectations K-12, which require learning from and about a diverse array of people and perspectives. School and district leaders, as well as librarians and teachers, should know that these expectations are in place. For instance:

- One of our proficiency-based graduation requirements in social studies, grade five, expects students to "Identify the beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and values that underlie their own and others' points of view about civic issues."
- Our proficiency-based graduation requirements in English Language arts require students to "Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible;

and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.”

In addition to reminding schools of what the state already expects schools to be doing, we can prepare educators, school boards, librarians with strategies for hearing complaints or concerns from members of the community about what we teach and what is in our book collections. In today’s polarized society, there are worse and better ways to respond to such concerns or complaints.

The American Library Association has a lot of useful resources on their website that could be shared across the VT education community - with the professional associations of school boards, superintendents, and principals, as well as school librarians and others.

ALA general preparedness tips:

<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/fight-censorship#challenge-preparedness>

How to respond to concerns:

<https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/respond>

Prepare school boards who might receive book ban requests ALA resources:

<https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/hearing>

Resources to help librarians and admin respond to questions about their collections from parents, others: <https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/youthresourcesFAQ>

So, in summary, my two recommendations are: support educators in doing what is already expected of them when it comes to valuing a diversity of perspectives in our libraries and other contexts for learning; second, help schools and libraries thoughtfully prepare for concerns that may arise, using the solid resources from the ALA and other sources.