



SECRETARY of STATE **ALEXI GIANNOULIAS**

Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias' Testimony
U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee – September 12, 2023

One of the most exciting responsibilities of serving as Secretary of State in the State of Illinois since January of this year, is the ability to serve as the “State Librarian”.

As our youth continue to need educational assistance in catching up after the disruption caused by COVID, I believe LIBRARIES, in every single community across this country, have had an especially critical role to play in increasing educational opportunities for ALL Americans.

So imagine my surprise when, in the year 2023, instead of inheriting a debate over what more can be done with our libraries and for our libraries, I was confronted with a “book banning” movement upon taking office.

You see, our libraries have become targets by a movement that disingenuously claims to pursue “freedom” but is instead promoting authoritarianism.

Tragically, our libraries have become the Thunderdomes of controversy and strife across our nation – the likes of which we’ve never seen before.

These radical attacks on our libraries have divided our communities. Our librarians have been harassed, threatened & intimidated for simply doing their jobs.

The need to stand up and fight for our freedoms and our librarians – especially at this perilous time for our democracy -- is why I initiated House Bill 2789.

This legislation – the first of its kind in the United States of America – is:

A triumph for our democracy,
A win for First Amendment rights, and most importantly
A great victory for future generations to come.

Under this legislation, Illinois libraries will NOT be eligible for state-funded library grants if they ban books.

This “*Right to Read*” legislation will help remove the pressure that librarians have tragically had to endure over the last couple years.

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This legislation is important because both the *concept* and the *practice* of “banning books” contradicts the very essence of what our country stands for and what our democracy was founded on.

It also defies what education is all about: Teaching our children to think for themselves.

If the book banners care to, they can go to our libraries and check out the Federalist Papers, the U.S. Constitution and even Supreme Court cases on the First Amendment.

What they will learn is that our democracy **depends** on the “marketplace of ideas”.

That “marketplace of ideas” will not function if we ban books -- because we will be banning **IDEAS** and preventing our children from thinking for themselves and having the ability to debate & learn & understand different perspectives.

We will be banning KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE, EMPATHY, UNDERSTANDING, and DIVERSE & DIFFERING WORLDVIEWS.

Ray Bradbury, the acclaimed Illinois author who wrote Fahrenheit 451, was quoted as saying:

“The problem in our country isn’t with books being banned, but with people no longer reading. You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

And **that’s** where the real danger lies.

Parents – and only parents – have the right and the responsibility to monitor the access of their children – and only **their** children – to library resources.

There were more than **2500** instances of books being banned in schools last year, including many American Classics such as:

“1984”

“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”

“The Catcher in the Rye”

“The Color Purple”

“The Kite Runner”

“Of Mice and Men”, and

“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” by Maya Angelou

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Look, I have three young daughters, and there are some books and titles that my wife and I don't feel are age appropriate for them.

But I could never imagine a world where I would tell another family what books *their* kids should or should not be allowed to read.

Book-banners say, they want "local control".

What's more "local" than controlling what takes place in your own household??? That's the very **definition** of "local control".

And the *ultimate* irony is that, by instituting more book bans, these groups want the government to have **MORE** of a say in telling everyone's children what to think & believe. That's government overreach at its peak.

Books are a vital way to open our minds to other cultures, religions, identities and possibilities.

Let's also remember the mental health crisis growing across the country. Access to books and the freedom of expression help battle ISOLATION. Books connect us and promote empathy & understanding.

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Our legislation establishes a clear path, opposite and away from the damaging trend to ban and censor books that a small, but loud few, disagree with.

We need to take any hint of censorship seriously because free speech is not only crucial to democracy, but imperative for the survival of our civilization.

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This issue should have NOTHING to do with political party. This isn't a Republican or Democrat issue. This is a "freedom of speech" and a "freedom of ideas" issue.

Not *once* during the creation of this legislation did I ask a Librarian if they were a democrat or a republican.

Not *once* did I ask an author if they were a democrat or a republican.

Not once did I ask a constitutional expert if they were a democrat or republican.

Yet every-single-person we spoke to, not only was in favor of this legislation, but was deeply concerned with even the *concept* of "book banning".

We want our schools & our libraries to be open and welcoming settings for education, *not* cultural battlefields.

This legislation aims to unify our communities and seeks to restore a right that some of us may have grown to take for granted: The freedom to think for ourselves.

It's my hope that others may look toward Illinois and see the value in adopting our legislation as a model to stop book banning in its tracks, and to protect the "Right to Read" freely and without fear of retribution.

I could not be prouder of this legislation and I implore everyone in this room to be please be on the right side of history, and push back against these "book bans" in every and any way possible!

Thank you.