

**Witness Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary**

for a hearing of the Full Committee on

**"Book Bans: Examining How Censorship Limits Liberty and Literature"**

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Committee members,

Thank you for this humbling opportunity to address you here at the nation's capital. My name is Cameron Samuels, I am a student from Katy, Texas, and I use gender-neutral pronouns, "they/them." I am the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the nonprofit Students Engaged in Advancing Texas, known as SEAT.

During my early childhood, I lived alongside fields of cattle when I entered kindergarten in the Katy Independent School District. Thirteen years later in 2022, I graduated from Seven Lakes High School when the district had more than 90,000 students. I always loved my school district, but over the past few years, we have faced a so-called "culture war" over book bans.

My firsthand experience began in Fall 2021 when a few parents sought to remove Jerry Craft's *New Kid* from school libraries and cancel his author visit. In the novel, Craft uses his personal experiences to illustrate a Black child attending a nearly all-White school. *New Kid* is a children's book, like any other, but some in the community decided to weaponize identity to remove Black books from the shelves.

I always believed my community celebrated its diversity, with my school's annual International Festival as a highlight of my year, but the conversation on books quickly escalated at following school board meetings. Eventually, I could no longer watch board members speak for me without hearing my concerns, so I decided to sign up to speak at a meeting.

Walking into the board room that Monday night, with class at 7:25 AM the very next morning, I quickly came to realize I was the only student there. I've now recognized that meant, as a student, I was the only one whose future was directly affected by the district's policymaking.

The board president began calling speakers to the lectern, and when my turn came, the room gave no applause but silence and stares as I walked back to my seat. They continued applauding the adults who sought to restrict student access to literature, but for me, I was met with silence. I was left to feel isolated and alone in a room of people making policy about students like me, but without us at the decision-making table.

Over the following months, I continued standing up for my freedom to read, but my school district continued removing books from shelves at record pace. Nearly all these books were targeted for identity – such as LGBTQ+ themes, racial diversity, religion, or addressing gender-based violence. These books represent our diversity as a student body and give us an opportunity to learn beyond classroom curriculum.

When students found themselves more represented in books being challenged than books left in school libraries, I gathered student groups to lead efforts to distribute hundreds of banned books to students district-wide. We packed school board meetings with community members who knew we deserved better. The stares I once received three months earlier were stairs we climbed on.

There's only so much that can be learned in the classroom, and libraries offer an extended opportunity for discovery. Libraries are centers for voluntary inquiry. Censorship, however, places a limit on students' liberty to learn.

Censorship erases our social identity, and in result, censorship erases our humanity.

Decades before the Holocaust, a German poet wrote, "wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings." When the Katy school district began targeting Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, I could not fathom that depictions of cartoon mice, walking naked to Nazi gas chambers, were considered "pervasively vulgar" by the book's challengers.

My ancestors fled from Eurasia because of religious persecution against Jewish identity, and as a religious minority in Texas, it has never been easy. I have faced too many antisemitic remarks in school to remember, and classmates have told me the Holocaust does not exist.

The censorship of Holocaust education erases my culture and identity from the narrative before it was even sufficiently there. When my peers cannot name a single Jewish person they know, media representation is where they learn about us, and often, it is dominated by stereotypes and caricatures.

Books like *Maus* teach students an accurate reflection of Jewish identity. If a classmate of mine knew the real extent of the Holocaust, maybe they would have thought twice about their actions.

Maybe they would have thought twice about spraying cologne in my face. He said he was "gassing the Jew."

Where they burn books, they burn people.

Last year, a parent filed a police report against Mike Curato's *Flamer*, a novel about a biracial and effeminate Boy Scout who is bullied and traumatized by toxic culture. The book is based on the author's experience, but the book also illustrates my experience. I saw myself in the story, having gone through the same harassment in middle school.

After so many years, I came to recognize that I was not alone. I was traumatized and felt I simply did not belong, but I was wrong. Toxicity does not belong, and *Flamer* gave me words for it. Unfortunately, this book was banned, along with many others with LGBTQ+ themes, leaving many queer students unable to find themselves represented in our school libraries. Censorship policies bar students from age-relevant materials, leaving them unable to realize how their actions could traumatize others with unique experiences unfamiliar to them.

Local police responded to the parent's report by entering a high school library to remove the book. In history, the Gestapo secret police force in Nazi Germany acted alarmingly in the same fashion. I could not believe my community was facing similar tactics of intimidation and fear mongering that my ancestors fled from across the world to escape. When, may I ask the nation, will I need to flee for my safety?

It's not only school districts taking on this censorship, but it's also the state of Texas with a requested investigation into school district library collections and House Bill 900. During the state legislature this year, my peers and I worked with senators to introduce amendments to the bill, providing accountability measures and nondiscrimination protections. These amendments were rejected, and already, the bill is caught up in legal proceedings and faces an injunction.

From a historical lens, censorship has never been on the right side of history.

Furthermore, censorship most certainly is a slippery slope. In Katy, they have even banned children's books like *Wacky Wednesday* by Dr. Seuss and *No, David* by David Shannon for comical reasons. Next door, the state of Texas has converted many libraries in the Houston school district into discipline centers. Discipline centers, where book shelves have been turned around to face the wall. Censorship like this sounds satirical, but it's our reality in Texas.

My state is home to more than [8 million people under the age of 20](#), and because everything is bigger in Texas, we happen to be the [leading state for book bans](#). Policies made by our school

districts and state legislature affect us and our futures. We must recognize the decisions of individual families do not supersede students' rights to our own education.

Students deserve to be active decision-makers in our daily experiences as we attend class. The actions of one person alone, challenging a book in a school library, should not burden and restrict the education of 90,000 students in my district without due process. The Katy school district now allows for merely two board members – out of seven – to reject the decision of a book review committee and officially remove books from every shelf in the district.

Censorship is undemocratic when it suppresses the marginalized and silences the vulnerable.

School board meetings should be centers for growth and opportunities for students to engage with those making decisions for them, but these lengthy meetings have become the frontlines of a "culture war." It's about time students have agency in our education.

We cannot stand for viewpoint discrimination that contradicts our First Amendment principles and targets the most vulnerable students. We must ensure library review policies nationwide protect literature from ideological scrutiny against identity, as affirmed by the Supreme Court, and we must hold accountable any effort to remove books from library collections. We need research and oversight, not blanket permission to remove "Pride sections" from libraries like they voted on in my school district.

Libraries are for learning about oneself through the lens of literature. Libraries are not for certain people to challenge identities they disagree with, at the expense of the broader community.

Censors create silence when they diminish our education, deplete our libraries, deprive students of our rights, and discredit educators.

You may not see eye-to-eye with me, but as a student, I must tell you that we are facing a students' rights crisis in Texas and nationwide.

It should not have been my responsibility as a 17-year-old to defend my rights and challenge bigotry. Protecting children requires empowering us students, not allowing one or two parents to dictate the policies of an entire community.

Ensuring our decision-making represents and reflects education's primary stakeholders – the students – we can proceed with a sophisticated solution that facilitates collaboration between students, families, and educators.

Thank you.