



Dear Representative Adam Thomas

Kansas House Committee on Education

Re: HB 2700

IN OPPOSITION

My name is Sean Bird. I am the president of the Kansas Library Association, and the Kansas Library Association stands in opposition to HB 2700, a bill establishing a school library rating system task force and requiring school districts to implement a rating system for materials available to public school library students. As a lifelong Kansan, I fundamentally believe that parents should always have the ultimate decision to determine what is appropriate for their children, from their bedtime to the books they read. To begin, the idea that a task force comprised of a majority of people appointed by Kansas legislative leadership should make all Kansans who value local control of our schools uncomfortable if not downright frustrated. Local schools and the libraries that serve the students at those schools deserve collections that reflect the communities they inhabit. The notion that there should be a one-size-fits all collection policy that is dictated by a board intentionally circumventing local control flies in the face of the Kansas values of independence and freedom of choice.

The bill requires the task force to develop a rating system for materials that considers “the appropriateness of materials with respect to grade level and provide a clear method of rating such materials such that school district employees and parents and legal guardians can readily discern whether such material is appropriate for a student.” Appropriateness is a mushy term on its best days. The task force as described does not take into consideration the professional credential or expertise of the members of the task force, and absent guidance by literacy professionals the objective of appropriateness without a clear understanding of how reading is taught could interfere with the delicate progression of moving pre-readers to emergent readers to proficient readers to expert readers in a timely manner. The research finds that to be expert readers, most children need systematic reading instruction when they are young. Time is of the essence.

Librarians and educators today employ an array of strategies and programs drawn from reading research as they meet each student where he or she enters the educational environment. To do so efficiently, metrics like Lexile levels and programs like Accelerated Reader evaluate reading materials using, among other characteristics, phonics, content, and intellectual development level to help the librarian move students along the reading pathway that best fits the needs of the reader at hand. Sometimes that means recognizing that some students need high interest, lower reading level, while recognizing that some students are ready to read at the next level right away. A capricious, prejudicial rating system seeking to define what material is “appropriate” for Kansas students to read is not the answer. Kansans believe that credentialed professionals working with existing local oversight as in the current model makes the most sense for Kansans.

There is a fiscal concern with HB 2700, too. According to the bill, the task force will be on call at the behest of the chair and will receive expenses, milage, and subsistence per Kansas statute. Although no methodology for determining what is appropriate is provided in the bill, the implication is that books, magazines, pamphlets, and audio and video recordings that are made available to students will be considered. What is not clear is if the task force will be looking at each title individually. One school librarian in Kansas reported 115,000 individual cataloged items in the collection the librarian oversees. That school alone will cost Kansans handsomely in meals and mileage alone. Should the task force be providing guidance alone and imposing the act of identifying the appropriateness of individual materials based on that guidance in the school librarian, the cost is even greater. If it takes 30 minutes for the librarian mentioned above to process and shelve each of the materials in the collection and the librarian makes twenty dollars an hour, that library alone costs Kansas taxpayers over one million dollars to implement. No Kansan I know thinks that makes fiscal sense.

But the real concern for Kansas librarians is that the bill clearly is not about the books or reading, and it is most definitely not about children. HB 2700 is another attempt to cast Kansas school librarians as somehow unfit for their jobs and that is simply not true. I'm going to ask you and all the members of the Kansas House Committee on Education to look into your hearts and see there the librarians that you know, that you knew as students. Librarians are part of a helping profession that for all the modern era have dedicated themselves to getting the right book into the hands of the students they serve day in and day out. Librarians know who wants books about dinosaurs and who wants books about sports, which students love books about history and which students crave books about the future. And they make thoughtful, intentional decisions based on the child before them at the time. Kansas school librarians know that if they can connect a student to a book, they can give that student joy for a moment in time. But they know that if they can get a student to fall in love with reading, they will give that student a lifetime of joy. It happens in Kansas school libraries every day.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns. Please see below for my contact information. I am happy to visit more. But really you should visit with your Kansas school librarian and the librarian at the community library in town. You will find that they are just like you remember: passionate, dedicated public servants filled with duty and love for the patrons, for the young Kansans they come to work to guide and nurture every single day.

In service,

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