

July 22, 2025

Representative Sean Garballey, House Chair

Senator Paul Mark, Senate Chair

Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts and Cultural Development

Dear Chair Mark and Chair Garballey,

My name is Sean Cahill. I am Director of Health Policy Research at the Fenway Institute at Fenway Community Health Center in Boston. Fenway Health strongly supports H.3594, An Act regarding free expression.

According to the Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey and the Mass. Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), about 9% of adults in Massachusetts identify as LGBT or another sexual orientation, and about 23% of Massachusetts high school students identify as LGBT or are unsure of their identity.¹ According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, nearly half (48.5%) of Massachusetts public school and charter school students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or multiracial.²

I mention these two data points—that 23% of high school students are LGBT or questioning, and that 48.5% are people of color—because the two types of library books most commonly censored in the United States are books about LGBTQ+ people and books written by Black people about American history. According to the National Coalition Against Censorship, “Books by Black authors are among the most frequently banned. They tell important stories of survival in the South during slavery, Black struggle against segregation, and the ongoing battle for racial justice.” Among books commonly banned are novels by Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison and Presidential Medal of Honor winner Maya Angelou.³ Books about racism in American history are also frequently targeted by would be censors. These include *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, and *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones.⁴

¹ Cahill S, Crebase W, and Knox MS (2025). *LGBTQ+ people in Massachusetts: Strengths, challenges, and opportunities in a diverse community*. Boston: The Equality Fund at the Boston Foundation and the Fenway Institute. Page 10. <https://www.tbf.org/news-and-insights/reports/2025/may/lgbtq-people-in-massachusetts-2025-report>

² Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. *2025 Enrollment By Race/Gender Report (District)*. Updated January 23, 2025. <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx>

³ National Coalition Against Censorship. *Top 10 banned books that changed the face of Black history*. <https://ncac.org/news/blog/top-10-banned-books-that-changed-the-face-of-black-history>

⁴ Wisenbarger L. *Highlighting Banned Books by Black Authors for Black History Month*. ACLU of Ohio. February 25, 2025. <https://www.acluohio.org/news/highlighting-banned-books-black-authors-black-history-month/>

LGBTQ+ themed books are also frequently banned.⁵ LGBTQ+ youth experience stigma and violence victimization in schools. These experiences correlate with higher rates of behavioral health burden, including suicidal ideation and self-harm. A recent analysis of Mass. YRBS and Mass. Youth Health Survey data found that LGBT high school students in Massachusetts were three times more likely to report self-injury in the past year (39.3% versus 13.3%) and four times more likely to report having seriously considered suicide in the past year (30.4% versus 7.5%).⁶ Research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth in schools with positive climates toward LGBTQ+ issues have lower rates of suicidality.⁷ Having books available on LGBTQ+ themes and experiences, and inclusion of LGBTQ+ figures and topics in literature and history classes, are resiliency factors for LGBTQ+ youth, and correlate with better health and well-being for LGBTQ+ and all youth in schools.^{8,9}

In 2023 in Massachusetts “there were 37 attempts to ban or restrict books in 2023, with 63 titles affected,” according to a 2024 report from the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.¹⁰ Those seeking to ban books portray themselves as grassroots concerned parents, but in reality this is an orchestrated, politicized campaign of censorship. According to the American Library Association, the percentage of total titles targeted by pressure groups and decision makers influenced by these pressure groups increased from 25% in 2020 to 74% in 2024.¹¹

H.3594, An Act regarding free expression, states that:

library materials should not be proscribed or removed because of personal, political or doctrinal views, and materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background or views of those contributing to their creation

We at Fenway Health strongly agree. Young people should be able to read novels about the Black American experience and about LGBTQ experiences. These are their experiences, and they are American experiences. Please support this important legislation.

⁵ Perfes SL, “Who’s getting hurt most by soaring LGBTQ book bans? Librarians say kids.” *The Harvard Gazette*. June 28, 2023. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/06/lgbtq-book-challenges-are-on-the-rise-heres-why/>

⁶ Cahill S, Crebase W, and Knox MS (2025). *LGBTQ+ people in Massachusetts: Strengths, challenges, and opportunities in a diverse community*. Boston: The Equality Fund at the Boston Foundation and the Fenway Institute. Page 12. <https://www.tbf.org/news-and-insights/reports/2025/may/lgbtq-people-in-massachusetts-2025-report>

⁷ Ancheta AJ, Bruzzese JM, Hughes TL. The Impact of Positive School Climate on Suicidality and Mental Health Among LGBTQ Adolescents: A Systematic Review. *J Sch Nurs*. 2021 Apr;37(2):75-86.

⁸ Johns MM, Poteat VP, Horn SS, Kosciw J. Strengthening Our Schools to Promote Resilience and Health Among LGBTQ Youth: Emerging Evidence and Research Priorities from *The State of LGBTQ Youth Health and Wellbeing* Symposium. *LGBT Health*. 2019 May/Jun;6(4):146-155.

⁹ GLSEN. *Advocate for Inclusive & Affirming Curriculum*. No date. <https://www.glsen.org/inclusive-curriculum>

¹⁰ American Library Association. “American Library Association reports record number of unique book titles challenged in 2023.” March 14, 2024. <https://www.ala.org/news/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles>

¹¹ American Library Association. *Censorship by the numbers*. <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers>

Thank you for considering this testimony. Please contact me at scahill@fenwayhealth.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

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