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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement of Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney Hearing on “Free Speech Under Attack (Part II): Curriculum Sabotage and Classroom Censorship” May 19, 2022

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this very timely hearing. I’d also like to commend you for your leadership in taking on this issue in your Subcommittee.

I served as a teacher early in my career. I know how challenging a job it can be, and also how important it is that educators are free to tell our children the truth—the truth about our history, the truth about our great nation, and the truth about themselves.

Censoring classroom discussions on race, gender, and LGBTQ issues is an affront to the right of free speech guaranteed in our Constitution. It can also have devastating consequences. The horrifying, racist attack at a grocery store in my home state this past weekend shows what happens when we let ignorance and hatred spread.

That attack was carried out by a man who targeted a Black neighborhood in Buffalo and killed ten innocent people. He found his motivation in a racist and radical conspiracy theory that he discovered online.

On June 8th, the full Committee will examine the failures that allowed guns to get into the hands of this individual and other criminals. But today, we are talking about a more fundamental concern—how censorship laws will facilitate the further spread of hateful ideologies.

Because hiding the truth from our children, as the state laws we’re discussing today aim to do, only makes it more likely that racism, homophobia, and other lies will fester and spread.

Proponents of some of these new censorship laws claim they want to protect children. But banning classroom instruction on uncomfortable issues like slavery, Jim Crow, and the Black and LGBTQ civil rights movements does nothing to protect children. Nor do we protect children when we hide books from them that might teach them about the beauty and humanity of people and cultures that are different from their own.

Among the most disturbing aspects of these censorship laws is how they seek to poison the relationship between teachers, students, and their families—turning relationship of trust into relationships of fear.

For example, lesbian, gay, and transgender students often see schools as safe havens where they can learn about who they are, and seek guidance from a trusted teacher or counselor.

Evidence shows that LGBTQ children who have even a single adult they can confide in, especially when they may not have one at home, are far less likely to attempt suicide than their peers who have no support.

But laws like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida make it almost impossible for teachers to talk about LGBTQ issues, and could even require teachers to report a child who comes out to them to the child’s parents. This puts an already vulnerable population of students at even greater risk.

These extreme censorship laws also put teachers in constant fear of discipline and even legal or financial harm—simply for doing their jobs. As we’ll hear in testimony today, some teachers are leaving the profession because of

these new laws will prevent them from teaching without fear of punishment. Those who remain in the profession will have to work in constant fear that someone will report them for saying something in the classroom that politicians don't want them to say.

Policymakers should be partnering with teachers to prepare students for the world they'll inherit as adults. That's what I did when I authored the bipartisan "Never Again Education Act." At a time of rising antisemitism, I saw better education and more information as a solution. So I wrote a bill to devote more resources to the development of instructional materials on the Holocaust and how to prevent genocide, hate, and bigotry. It was signed into law in May 2020 after passing both houses of Congress nearly unanimously.

Now here we are two years later, and state governments are trying to block the discussion of difficult topics in our classrooms. This is not who we are. We have come too far to be moving backwards.

So thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for your attention to this important issue. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

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