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Chair Michael Bileca  
Vice Chair Robert Cortes  
Ranking Member Shevrin Jones  
House Education Committee  
313 House Office Building  
402 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399

By electronic mail: michael.bileca@myfloridahouse.gov, bob.cortes@myfloridahouse.gov, shevrin.jones@myfloridahouse.gov

Re: H.B. 989


As a coalition of organizations with considerable experience defending challenged books in the public school system, we write to raise our concerns about H.B. 989: Instructional Materials for K-12 Public Education. The bill threatens to undermine the quality of education in Florida by potentially inviting and facilitating wasteful, expensive, and viewpoint-based challenges to curricular materials and by permitting local school boards to deviate from state-approved curricula in favor of subjectively defined “equivalent” or “better” standards. We hope you will keep our considerations in mind when reviewing this bill and urge you to vote against it.

1. The Bill Will Facilitate Challenges that Undermine the Quality of Education

H.B. 989 invites viewpoint-based challenges to curricular and media materials, as it permits any resident of a county to challenge the use of curricular and media materials. There are many avenues by which residents may express concerns about the education system, but only parents who have a direct interest in the content of the educational program should be permitted to file formal challenges. The current provision invites local activist who do not even have children attending schools to disrupt the operation of the schools with complaints designed to advance their political agendas.

The potential for abuse is increased by the vagueness and inherent subjectivity of the bill’s language, which calls on school officials to use “non-inflammatory, objective, and balanced” materials, which opens the door to all manner of complaints based on personal viewpoints rather than educational criteria.

Countless canonical works of literature have been challenged in schools across the country on such subjective grounds. Indeed, parents have sought the removal of novels

Joan E. Bertin  
Executive Director

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS  
Actors’ Equity Association  
American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Professors  
American Association of University Women  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Society of Journalists & Authors  
Americans United for Separation of Church & State  
Association of American Publishers  
Authors Guild  
Catholics for Choice  
Children’s Literature Association  
College Art Association  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
International Literacy Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The Newspaper Guild/CWA  
PEN American Center  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Project Censored  
SAG-AFTRA  
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children’s Book Writers & Illustrators  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ  
Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications  
Women’s American ORT  
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West
and textbooks that they believe contain “inflammatory” themes such as sex, drug use, foul language, witchcraft, racial slurs and violence; or “biased” content that is “anti-American”, “anti-Christian” or “pro-Islam.” These challenges not only deprive students of access to thought-provoking and educationally valuable books but also negatively impact the curriculum, as teachers and librarians remove educationally valuable materials in order to avoid the burden of responding to challenges.

Determining whether a book is “objective” or “balanced” is more complicated than may appear on the surface. For example, science textbooks should not be “balanced,” if that term is taken to mean that it should present all ideas on a given topic, because not every theory is equally valid or supported by scientific evidence. For example, although some individuals continue to believe the Earth is flat, this view is not taught alongside accurate geological models. H.B. 989, however, would allow those individuals to challenge textbooks that correctly describe Earth on the basis that the textbook is not “balanced.”

It is for this reason that the National Center for Science Education and Florida Citizens for Science oppose the bill, on the ground that it will undermine the quality of science education by inviting challenges to widely accepted educational materials, in turn imposing significant burdens on school officials to respond to such challenges. Indeed, Florida Citizens for Science argues that the bill creates “a potential back door for inserting creationism and climate change doubts into the classroom.”

Scientists and science educators should determine together what should be taught in science class. Doing otherwise would undermine science education in the state and disadvantage its students as they compete for college admission and jobs.

2. The Bill Encourages Schools to Deviate From State Standards

We are also concerned that H.B. 989 allows schools to adopt instructional materials that are consistent with “standards that are equivalent to or better than the applicable state standards.” Because the bill provides no metric for assessing whether local standards are “equivalent to or better than,” it may enable local policymakers to undermine the quality of education.

Course content and curricular materials should be selected by professional educators and specialists in relevant disciplines. These experts play a critical role by identifying the essential knowledge and skills necessary for students to progress academically and function as informed citizens and by selecting curricular materials representing the consensus of experts in the field. Permitting local deviation from applicable state standards, depending on individual preferences and ideological pressures in different communities, would result in inconsistency in the substance and quality of education in the state. All students in Florida would be tainted by the failure to adhere to consistent criteria that meet widely accepted educational standards.

Sincerely,

Joan Bertin, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship

Brandon Haught, Communications Director
Board Member
Florida Citizens for Science
Charles Brownstein, Executive Director
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

Fatima Shaik, Co-Chair
Children’s and Young Adult Book Committee
PEN America

Millie Davis, Director
Intellectual Freedom Center
National Council of Teachers of English