

BY KATHLEEN CATES

Local Column

## NM lawmakers must protect our right to read

Imagine walking into a library filled with thousands of books and never finding one with a character who looks like you. Out of all the books in a public library, not one featured a character who shared your lived experience. Banning books is harmful because everyone should be able to easily find books with characters that represent them.

In the last year, 4,235 unique titles were challenged, making this the second-highest number in the history of the American Library Association. The same report stated, "39% of these challenged titles featured lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ people and people of color." This loss of representation leaves youth feeling unseen and as though their experiences aren't as important as others. Seeing characters with similar backgrounds and experiences in books helps youth feel accepted and understood. Other readers can benefit from these books, too. Reading about authentic experiences different from their own increases empathy and develops understanding for different perspectives. When titles like these are included, kids and teens learn that they are not alone and deserve to be represented.

Historically, libraries were only for the wealthy, landowners, religious leaders and men, but only with the foresight of our country's forefathers did libraries become accessible to the general public. If equal opportunity is truly a core American ideal, it makes sense that this would include access to knowledge and information. Libraries have evolved and now serve large, diverse communities all across the

country.

Library collections are carefully curated to reflect the communities they directly serve. Public libraries all have written processes and procedures to ensure the public has input in the collection. Parents can guide their children to books that they are comfortable with while letting others have access to books that appeal to them. We should never allow a person, special interest group or government agency to censor our access to knowledge. One reader's preferences and viewpoint should not determine what is found in the public library.

Libraries are meant to serve entire communities and should reflect the diversity of that community. Every person from every background should be able to walk into a public library and find information on any subject as well as find stories that represent them or expand their world view beyond what they could have imagined. This is why I strongly encourage voters to let their legislators know they support the Librarian Protection Act. Our community deserves access to knowledge, our children need a safe space to explore the world and our librarians need protection to support their community through process not politics.

Rep. Kathleen Cates, D-Rio Rancho, represents District 44 in the New Mexico House of Representatives.



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