

People are calling out Legislature's censorship

HUNDREDS of people turned out at the Bartholomew County Public Library last week for a protest of a sort. They sat and read. Some brought signs. No police were needed.

Certain Republican members of the Indiana General Assembly, including our local lawmakers, had better take note. They face a reckoning for supporting misguided bills aimed at muzzling teachers and threatening librarians for doing their jobs.

This session of the Indiana General Assembly has produced the most audacious attempted assaults on our basic freedoms we have ever witnessed coming from the Statehouse. The people see it, they are responding to it, and they are calling it out for what it is: authoritarian censorship.

Those who turned out for the read-in are against Senate Bill 17. Every Hoosier who values freedom ought to be. Senate Bill 17 is a travesty, yet it lives in the Statehouse — a threat to potentially prosecute librarians who expose minors to “harmful” material, even for educational purposes. The problem is that the bill itself is harmful, because one person’s “harmful” material may be another’s epiphany. The bill is harmful because the mission of librarians is to help people find what they are looking for; whether or not some repressive lawmaker thinks a book is “harmful.”

Republic reporter Brian Blair and photographer Mike Wolanin captured the scene at the library that was a piece of the backlash to such measures. Here were proud Americans, standing tall for their First Amendment rights by actually exercising them.

As Columbus resident Terry Clark astutely observed, our founders placed freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom to assemble in the First Amendment, first among our freedoms, for a reason: These freedoms give us the right to think for ourselves and to preserve all the freedoms that flow from them in our Bill of Rights and our Constitution.

At the same time the read-in was going on, a steady stream of teachers and parents were at the Capitol testifying against the anti-teacher bill that’s also advancing, House Bill 1134. Days earlier, a letter to the editor on this page from a who’s who of local community leaders (“Local leaders oppose ‘unnecessary’ education bill,” Feb. 16), opposed the bill. Among other things, the letter said the bill would “suspend or revoke the license of a teacher who engages students in meaningful discussion about systemic inequity.”

The bill was amended last week in the Senate, but it still contains language that would bar instruction of certain “divisive concepts.” That’s still censorship. And as a steady stream of teachers testified against the amended bill last week, they may as well have been talking to the wall. Lawmakers advanced the bill to the full Senate.

Our lawmakers aren’t listening. Worse, they aren’t representing the people’s chief interest: our First Amendment rights. Let’s be clear: There is no saving SB 17 or HB 1134. They’re rotten to the core and should be discarded as trash. Anything less is an assault on our rights.

It’s a shame our lawmakers can’t take a lesson from 7-year-old Boden Keele, who was at the read-in at the library in Columbus. Boden’s got this figured out.

“People should be able to read what they want to read,” he said.