

Olivia Data
Testimony on SB 2123
January 23, 2023

RE: Testimony in Opposition of SB 2123

Good morning, Chairwoman Larson and members of the committee. My name is Olivia Data, I am the Youth Action Council Coordinator for the North Dakota Women's Network, and I am writing to urge you to vote "Do Not Pass" on SB 2123.

The Youth Action Council is an organization that works to empower the youth of North Dakota and involve high school and college kids in civic engagement. Throughout all the projects we've done, one of our most important values has always been education. We believe that if we want a brighter future, young people must not only have access to education, but the encouragement to seek out answers to our questions and develop a love for learning.

Institutions such as museums, galleries, universities, and public libraries have always been a vital part of such a journey. These are spaces where artistry is celebrated, information is accessible, and young people are free to ask questions without shame or fear. In these places, we are encouraged to explore the world around us. We are able to use art, books, magazines, and more to learn about confusing and difficult topics in a safe and healthy way.

I'm sure you've all heard concerns about the dangers of social media, phone addiction, and unchecked internet usage. While phones can provide positive enrichment and easier access to information, it is true that they have many harmful effects as well. The internet and social media are no substitutes for the communities we can build face-to-face. Thus, in an increasingly online world, institutions such as art galleries, libraries, colleges, and more are essential if we want younger generations to have any hope of participating in their communities and staying excited

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about learning. For example, youth who experience an education rich in the arts are more likely to vote, read newspapers, and visit their libraries.¹ And according to the Young Adult Library Services Association, 87% of public libraries offer programs for teens.²

These institutions are vital to our abilities to learn and grow. But SB 2123 puts this all at risk. Of course children should not have unrestricted access to sexual content – which is why this bill must not pass. SB 2123, in purging all writing and images of the human body, takes away younger generations’ opportunities to learn about themselves and the world around them in a safe and healthy manner. If people cannot find answers to their questions in our libraries, museums, or universities, we will be pushed further into our phones. We will be pushed further into our own shame and ignorance.

Furthermore, who gets to decide what is meant to “exploit sex, lust, or perversion?” A romance novel describing a man and a woman holding hands could be viewed as risqué; a photograph depicting a shirtless man playing a sport or dancing could be seen as pornographic. Even the bible, a holy book and a source of learning for countless generations, contains descriptions of nudity and adult topics. Will we ban all depictions of the human body? Will we shame members of our own community for exploring the definitions of art and literature?

On a personal note, I had the opportunity last summer to intern for The Capital Gallery. The art displayed in the gallery was a celebration of life, nature, and community. I loved seeing families

¹ Eastman, Michael. “The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies.” *National Endowment for the Arts*, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf>. Accessed 22 January 2023.

² “Teens Need Libraries - YALSA.” *American Library Association*, <https://www.ala.org/yalsa/teens-need-libraries>. Accessed 22 January 2023.

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come into the gallery and form connections with sculptures of dancing women or paintings of North Dakota wildlife. There were a few bookshelves in the gallery with books about art that served as resources for artists in our community. And yes, many of them contained images of partially nude figures. Art is meant to both embrace and challenge human emotion. There is no way to tell for certain what a photograph or piece of writing is meant to do. Thus it is very plausible that such books as those displayed in the gallery could be banned by this very bill. The photographs that inspired artists to embrace their creativity, the art that helped families bond together, the books that have educated and comforted countless people are all placed at risk by SB 2123. How can we encourage youth to celebrate learning and creativity if we are afraid of these things ourselves?

We all deserve to be able to learn and grow in a safe and healthy environment. If we want to have any hope of preserving any places of knowledge, art, and community for future generations, we must stop censoring our libraries, museums, universities, and galleries. Please, help us build a world where youth are empowered, supported, and excited about learning. I urge you to vote “Do Not Pass” on SB 2123.

Thank you, and please do not hesitate to email me at yac@ndwomen.org if you would like to ask any questions about my testimony.

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