

NEWS RELEASE

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Ohio's Public Libraries Raise Alarm Over State Budget Cuts and Censorship Provision

Columbus — The Ohio Library Council (OLC), representing Ohio's 251 public library systems, is sounding the alarm over provisions in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-2027 state budget (House Bill 96) that threaten both the financial stability and mission of Ohio's public libraries.

The budget includes a \$25 million reduction in funding to the Public Library Fund (PLF), dropping total state support from \$504.6 million in FY25 to \$479.7 million in FY26. This decrease is the result of a shift to a fixed line-item appropriation and the addition of \$10.3 million in annual transfers to support state agencies and other organizations, money that will be diverted directly from local public libraries.

"This is a direct hit to Ohio's libraries and the communities they serve," said Michelle Francis, Executive Director of the OLC. "We're already facing increased demand for services, and now we're expected to do more with significantly less."

More alarming, however, is a provision buried in HB 96 (ORC Section 3375.47), which would require public libraries to segregate materials related to sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, guaranteeing they are not visible to anyone under 18.

"This language is dangerously vague, overly broad, and ultimately unworkable," said Francis. "It opens the door to unconstitutional censorship and undermines the core mission of libraries—to provide free and open access to information."

Ohio's public libraries have long-established collection development policies that ensure materials reflect the needs of their local communities. These policies include processes for public input, parental controls, and age-appropriate library card options.

"Libraries are not substitutes for parents," said Francis. "We support families by providing access and options, but ultimately, it's up to parents and guardians to decide what their children read."

Legal experts have already raised constitutional red flags, warning that the HB 96 language could violate both state and federal free speech protections. In Arkansas, a similar law was struck down in federal court for violating the First Amendment.

Implementing this mandate in Ohio could come with an extraordinary cost. Some library systems estimate it would take up to six years of staff time and millions of dollars to audit and relocate materials. One large system projects compliance would cost over \$3.1 million—additional funds that are not provided for in the budget.

For smaller libraries with limited square footage, complying would be physically impossible. In some cases, this law could result in entire library branches becoming adult-only spaces, depriving families of vital access to learning, literature and community programs.

“This provision has no financial impact on the state’s balance sheet, but it would force local libraries to spend millions of dollars and years of staff time complying with an unfunded, unconstitutional mandate,” said Francis. “This is a dangerous overreach that undermines intellectual freedom and punishes the very institutions that provide safe and open spaces for Ohioans of all ages.”

The OLC and Ohio’s public libraries are urging Governor DeWine to veto this harmful provision and support these trusted institutions that have benefited local communities for more than a century.

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