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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for having me here today, and thank you to Representative Stewart for inviting me to testify on this important issue **in support of House Bill 7386**. My name is Daniel Solomon, and I am a researcher at *Brown Votes*, the nonpartisan University-sponsored voting and democratic participation initiative of Brown University, where I am a sophomore concentrating in Urban Studies and Political Science.

I come to you today in my position at *Brown Votes*, having been born and raised in Miami, Florida, and attending Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Since the Florida governor signed House Bill 1069 into law last May, Florida public school districts have removed over 300 books from libraries, with over 1,200 objections filed last school year, according to a report¹ from the Florida Department of Education. In a recent report² last month by the Florida Freedom to Read Project, over 1,600 books are being considered for banning in just one Florida county, including the *Merriam-Webster's Elementary Dictionary*; biographies on Thurgood Marshall and Oprah Winfrey; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; along with eight different encyclopedias.

Perhaps most significant is the current deliberation whether to ban the *Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. According to a 2023 independent survey³ conducted by the American Jewish Committee, only 26% of respondents could correctly answer four basic questions about the Holocaust. Any attempt to erase history will do nothing but ensure it will repeat – with vengeance.

Mr. Chairman, if there was ever a time to stand up and protect the freedom to read, for libraries to engage our citizenry without external pressure, and to fight for the democratic right to learn more about and question the world in which we live, that time is now. Partisanship and political agendas have no place on our bookshelves. Attempting to limit or restrict literary and historical perspectives and beliefs in our Rhode Island public libraries is inherently undemocratic. At a time in our country's history when freedom of speech is in constant persecution, we must remain firm in our belief that all Rhode Islanders are entitled to the wide variety of ideas and expressions that enable intellectual growth and nuanced, educated understanding.

Public education and learning more about our world and each other is how we as a society can combat ignorance and prejudice; it's how conspiracy theories are debunked and mutual understanding is achieved. Libraries have this power, and their freedoms must be protected at all costs. As stated clearly and succinctly in line 19 of this Act, "Free People Read Freely."

Thank you.

¹ <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5574/urlt/2223ObjectionList.pdf>

² <https://pen.org/escambia-county-florida-banned-books-list/>

³ <https://www.ajc.org/AntisemitismReport2023#prioritybox>