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From: Christiansen, Erik <echristiansen@ric.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, February 28, 2024 9:35 PM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Subject: H7386 Supporting Testimony

Testimony in Support of H7386

We write today in Support of H7386, The Freedom to Read Bill, on behalf of RIC/AFT Local 1819, the union of Rhode Island College faculty, including faculty librarians.

Libraries, including both public libraries and those established as part of our system of public K-12 and higher education, play a vital role in ensuring that all members of our communities—regardless of their financial situation—can access a wide variety of textual and audiovisual materials that reflect the diversity of both knowledge and perspectives. This access is essential for many reasons, including the free pursuit of understanding and the development of key skills—and is even mentioned in Article XII of Rhode Island’s state constitution.

Specific legislation protecting libraries, librarians, and the freedom to read is unfortunately necessary in our political moment, when people who are opposed to free inquiry spend untold resources attacking books and the professionals who help ensure access to them. Rhode Island stands out among its neighbors in not having made a commitment to ensuring the freedom to read. And the problem of attempted censorship is real: nearly 2000 library materials were challenged in Rhode Island in just the first six months of 2023 alone, a number likely to continue to rise. Libraries cannot afford the time and resources they must spend defending themselves and their employees against these censorious attempts, and our communities cannot afford the risk that radical actors may be able to prevail in censoring our access to important cultural and intellectual materials.

As professionals, librarians already have processes via which community members can object to books; the key to H7386 is that it ensures that librarians are able to continue to exercise their professional judgement to make the right decisions about collection selection and development. They need to be able to carry out their responsibilities without fear of intimidation, adverse employment action, or prosecution.

As college faculty who work hard to help our students develop critical thinking and information literacy skills, we know that it can crucial for students to experience texts that advocate for perspectives with which they may not agree—not, of course, to convince them to change their minds, but rather to enhance their ability to use information appropriately, argue persuasively, and understand diverse perspectives. Our faculty librarians are integral to the educational mission of Rhode Island College specifically because they are professionally trained and eminently skilled in helping students develop these skills through the process of finding and using texts. As Walter Cronkite is often quoted as saying, “Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.” Thus, we urge you to take the step of passing H7386 to protect our library, our librarians, and all libraries and librarians in the State of Rhode Island so that they can continue to do the work of bringing the world to our communities.

Signed,

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