



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

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Library Board of Rhode Island

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The Honorable Evan P. Shanley
Chairperson, House State Government & Elections Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

April 2, 2025

Dear Chair Shanley:

The Library Board of Rhode Island would like to enter this written testimony in full support of the Freedom to Read Act, House Bill 5726. At the core of the issues on which the Freedom to Read Act focus is what a library is. Andrew Carnegie once said, "There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration." That quote perfectly encapsulates the idea that libraries are a source of information and library materials to encourage the free flow of ideas for and with everyone.

Essentially, libraries take collective funding to build collections for their community that both reflect their community as a whole while also representing the unique individuals, families, and groups that make up the community. Everyone is welcome to make use of what can be found on a library's shelves, but no one is required to check out or read any specific items.

In these modern times, we are seeing librarians and educators being targeted with criminal prosecution as a result of items in their collections containing information about sex, exploring LGBTQ+ themes, or for teaching about health and sexuality topics. Similarly, books that focus on the experiences and life stories of people of color are being targeted. More commonly, in order to avoid potential harassment, librarians and educators engage in soft censorship by not purchasing certain books or materials, rather than utilizing their professional judgment on the merits of the items.

Rhode Island has not been immune to book challenges, and school libraries, in particular, have been targeted. The State has also seen criminal complaints filed against educators.

Professional librarians curate collections of materials that will meet the needs and interests of those in their communities, following policies approved by their governing boards. These policies provide guidance for selecting materials for inclusion in the collection and outline a standardized process for members of the public to register a concern about a particular item, called a reconsideration policy. The submission of a reconsideration form allows the staff to follow up with the person filing the request to have a conversation about the title in question and to collect the complainant's

viewpoint and include it when rendering a decision as to whether the item should be removed, reclassified to a different section of the library, or retained where it is. Such policies usually include a procedure allowing the complainant to appeal the decision of the library staff with the board of trustees of the libraries. School libraries have similar policies. Collection development and reconsideration policies are a key requirement within the Freedom to Read Act, H5726.


The Library Board of Rhode Island does not question the rights and responsibilities that parents and legal guardians of children have in making decisions about what their children and families read. The board's members have particular concerns about the individuals who would like to decide what others can have access to for reading or learning purposes.

Additionally, the bill provides protections for librarians, teachers, and museum employees from criminal and civil charges for materials selected for inclusion in their collection. The bill also protects the right for Rhode Island's creators, such as authors and illustrators, to create and share their work using federal Miller test standards relating to obscenity as defined by the Supreme Court.

The freedom to read is a part of what makes America what it is. When we look to our libraries, that is where the free access to and exchange of information that makes democracy successful is encapsulated. What libraries have in their collections provides their patrons with opportunities to see themselves represented in the world, to get a chance to experience what it is like to be someone else, and to understand others better. That is why the freedom to read is so important.

The members of the Library Board of Rhode Island ask the House Committee on State Government & Elections to support this bill and move it to the full House for consideration and passage.

Sincerely,


Aaron J. Coufu, Vice Chair

Cc: Speaker Joseph Shekarchi
House Majority Leader Christopher R. Blazewski