

To: House State Government & Elections Committee
From: Bill Lancellotta
Subject: Support for HB #5726: RI Freedom to Read Act
Date: April 1, 2025

Dear House Committee on State Government & Elections,

My name is Bill Lancellotta and I am in support of H 5726, which would protect the Freedom to Read for all Rhode Islanders. I am in support of this bill because, as a librarian in Westerly, I have witnessed firsthand the chilling effects of the censorship efforts that have become all too frequent in our nation. When I went back to school nine years ago to pursue an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Studies), I had no idea that I would become embroiled in a culture war that pits supporters of the first amendment against book banning zealots.

I have seen fellow librarian Marianne Mirando harassed for simply doing her job supplying her students at Westerly High School with diverse materials. This harassment went so far as seeking criminal charges against her after the demand to remove a book from the school library was denied. I was present when our town council debated endorsing a bill that threatened librarians and educators with steep fines and jail time. Each time a librarian got up to address the council, the opposition grumbled “groomer” or “pedophile”. Imagine you are someone who has dedicated your life to helping the young people of your community to then be rewarded by being called a pedophile. We even experienced a person who checked out children’s books with no objectionable content and threatened to keep them if we did not take down a Pride display. These intimidation tactics were unsuccessful, but not without taking tolls on library services and the mental health of our staff. Time spent fighting back against these censorship efforts, means less time devoted to the real work of librarians – helping the people of our communities find the information and services they need, as well as building a diverse collection for all.

The passage of this bill would be of great benefit to not just librarians, educators, and authors, but to all people of Rhode Island. It takes a stand against censorship, establishes model collection policies for school and public libraries, and establishes an affirmative defense for school, museum, or library workers facing spurious charges. There is nothing in the bill that interferes with a parent’s role in their child’s upbringing and education. However, it would prevent people from forcing their choices on other parents and their children. Importantly, H 5726 reinforces the most common sense approach to library materials which is if you do not like the content of a book, put it back on the shelf. That book is there for someone else. This commitment to the Freedom to Read would stand as an example to other states who may wish to preserve our most cherished liberties in turbulent times.

Thank you for your consideration.

Bill Lancellotta, Westerly