

## Steven Sepe

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**From:** Jeffrey Goldwasser <noreply@adv.actionnetwork.org>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, April 2, 2025 12:04 PM  
**To:** House State Government and Elections Committee  
**Subject:** Support for HB #5726: RI Freedom to Read Act

Committee State Government Clerk,

Dear Members of the House Committee on State Government,

I am Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser, the spiritual leader of Temple Sinai in Cranston. I offer this testimony on behalf of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island and on behalf of the Board of Rabbis of Greater Rhode Island in favor of HB #5726, "The Freedom to Read Act."

Jews are known as "People of the Book," and the books we cherish the most are the ones that contain multiple voices with different opinions about the legal, ethical, and moral issues at the core of our belief and practice. The Talmud is the preeminent example of this, structured as a conversation among many authorities, each with strong opinions and often at odds with each other. Jewish tradition thrives on a diversity of opinions and free discourse among people with a variety of viewpoints. The rabbis famously stated, "Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure" (Pirkei Avot 5:17). The very idea of removing an idea or experience from our discourse, just because we happen to disagree with it, is anathema to us. It is an act of arrogance and of disloyalty to the concept of a free society in which no one can claim a monopoly on the truth.

This is among the reasons why I am so troubled by current efforts to ban books from school libraries through direct removal and through the "soft censorship" of policies against purchasing books considered "controversial." It is even more troubling that most of the books that have been targeted in this way contain themes of LGBTQ inclusion and the experiences of People of Color. We want all children to learn about the diversity of our society. We especially want BIPOC children to find the stories and experiences of their families and their culture in their libraries. We especially want LGBTQ children and children of families that have LGBTQ members to find their stories and their experiences in their libraries.

People of faith know that there is no truth that emerges from exclusion. People of faith know that our God is a God of everyone who finds no advantage in silencing and excluding voices. The only people who are determined to keep voices out of the public discourse are those who have something to fear from open discourse. We want our children to learn the power of a loving God who loves all of God's children.

There are some who will use the name of religion to claim that children need to be protected from ideas and experiences that will harm them. Quite apart from the fact that we already have amazing library professionals who work long and hard to fill library shelves with appropriate materials and who are guided by well developed professional standards, the idea of using religion in the 21st century as a way to silence people should be shocking and repellant to people of faith. Our faith is best protected by loving people, not excluding them and their stories.

"The Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act" (HB #5726), would maintain Rhode Islanders' access to the marketplace of ideas and information. It would shield libraries and librarians from frivolous lawsuits and outside pressure to remove books from their collections. It is an act of faith. It is an act that is true to the spirit of the Talmud – building our understanding of each other and our relationship with God by allowing voices to be heard. It is a path to understanding that is truly for the sake of Heaven. In the end, it is a path that will endure.

I urge passage of HB #5726.

With thanks,

Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser

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