

H5726  
Support  
Jennifer Lima

Dear Chair Shanley and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jennifer Lima and I am writing in strong support of H5726, the Freedom to Read Act.

In 2022, as a counterbalance to efforts to ban books and stop teaching of history in schools, I worked with a coalition of authors, libraries, and community groups, to put together the We are ALL Readers book festival - a celebration of diverse children's books and their creators. The ability to see oneself mirrored in literature, or to see a creator who shares your identity on stage is incredibly powerful for children's development and mental health. Representation matters.

People like to say that they're not for banning books, but anything that limits access to materials is book banning. "Age appropriateness" and "curating the curriculum" are just fancy terms for book banning. Librarians and teachers are afraid to put materials out because they don't want to deal with pushback from parents. That is also book banning. Children are aware of the current environment of bans and challenges of books that feature BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ characters or stories, and they feel that they, personally, are being banned.

Families unquestionably can decide that they do not want their child reading a certain book, but they do not have the right to limit another child's access to it. It's between a parent and a child to say, "You can't read that" but it's not up to the school or the library to keep that information from being available for other children.

School librarians are professional educators, trained in identifying materials to meet the needs of a broad and diverse communities of students using established district collection development policies, as well as reconsideration policies to respond to requests to review of specific materials, informed by guidelines from the American Library Association. Professionals in their field should not be afraid to do their job for fear of pushback, harassment, or in some cases arrest.

The Freedom to Read Act provides protection from frivolous lawsuits and criminal charges for work done as part of their job. This bill aligns Rhode Island with the 40+ states, including all other New England states, that have protections for library workers for work performed as part of their job.

In 2023 the number of titles targeted for censorship at public libraries increased by 92% over the previous year while school libraries saw an 11% increase. 47% of the books targeted for censorship were titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals. This is not a coincidence.

I have seen the look of pure joy on a child's face as they clutch a pile of books to their chest that look like them, or gaze up at authors who talk about being just like them. All young people deserve moments like this. By supporting the Freedom to Read Act, you can ensure that happens.

I urge you to pass this bill out of committee and send it to the floor for a full vote.  
Thank you.

Jennifer Lima  
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