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Testimony on H-5726, Freedom to Read Act
House State Government & Elections Committee
April 2, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Shanley and members of the House State Government & Elections Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**, and I serve as the **Director of Program Implementation and Policy** at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I strongly urge your **support** for **H-5726 – An Act Relating to Libraries – The Freedom to Read Act**, sponsored by Representative Morales and co-sponsored by Representatives Stewart, Paplauskas, Boylan, Carson, Cotter, Ajello, Speakman, Handy, and Kislak.

This legislation **promotes free expression and access to information** by prohibiting the censorship of library materials. Ensuring access to diverse and inclusive literature is not only an issue of **intellectual freedom** but also a **public health issue**, particularly as it relates to **mental health, health literacy, and community well-being**.

Access to Information as a Social Determinant of Health

The ability to **access, understand, and apply information** shapes **health behaviors, decision making, and access to resources**.¹ According to the **World Health Organization**, **health literacy is one of the strongest predictors of health outcomes** – and libraries play a crucial source of **accurate, timely, and diverse health information**.²

Book bans and restrictions **limit exposure to critical health-related content**, particularly on **mental health, LGBTQ+ issues, racial identity, and substance use**—topics that are **already stigmatized** in society. Censoring these materials **does not erase these issues**; instead, it **restricts the ability of young people and families to access the knowledge they need and deserve to navigate them safely**.

Mental Health and Community Well-Being

According to **PEN America**, during the **2023-2024 school year**, there were **10,046 instances of book bans across 29 states and 220 public school districts**.³ Right here in **Rhode Island**, we have seen a disturbing rise in **attempts to disrupt drag story hours and ban books in communities like Westerly and Pawtucket**.⁴

¹ LaRose, “Information as a Social Determinant of Health”; Benda et al., “Broadband Internet Access Is a Social Determinant of Health!”

² World Health Organization, “Health Literacy.”

³ PEN America, “Book Bans.”

⁴ Miller, “The Book Censorship Movement Has Touched Rhode Island and Librarians and Organizations Are Responding with Measures Aimed at Protecting Freedoms and Access – and Librarians Themselves. – Ocean State Stories.”

Proponents of book bans argue they are “**protecting children**” from inappropriate content or “indoctrination”, yet research shows that **restricting access to books can actually harm youth**, particularly **adolescents**, by creating a **less inclusive and more restrictive learning environment**.⁵

- **57% of banned books address sexuality and relationships**
- **44% feature characters or perspectives from communities of color**
- **39% include LGBTQ+ representation**
- **59% discuss grief and death**
- **40% addressed substance use or abuse**
- **38% focus on mental health disorders**
- **37% promote self-empowerment and self esteem**⁶

By banning books on **mental health, substance use, grief, and identity**, we further **stigmatize topics that young people already struggle to discuss**.⁷ Instead of **eliminating difficult conversations**, books provide **safe opportunities for youth to explore complex emotions, build resilience, and find connections to other who share their lived experiences**.⁸

The Mental Health Impact on Marginalized Communities

Young people from **marginalized communities—including LGBTQ+ youth, racial and ethnic minorities, and children from low-income families**—already face **higher rates of depression, anxiety, and discrimination**.⁹ Book bans disproportionately erase our stories, contributing to **feelings of isolation and mental distress**.

- **39% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered suicide in 2024**¹⁰
- **12% of LGBTQ+ youth attempted suicide in last year**¹¹
- **Black and Latino youth face higher rates of mental health challenges** yet have less access to culturally competent care.
- **Children from low-income backgrounds are twice as likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**, which increase the risk of long-term mental health challenges.¹²

Rather than **censoring stories that reflect diverse lived experiences**, we should be **ensuring that young people can see themselves represented—validating their identities and helping them navigate the challenges they face**.

⁵ Pickering, ““Harmful to Minors””; McAlister et al., “Social Media Use in Adolescents”; Bailey, “To Read or Not to Read.”

⁶ Meehan et al., “Banned in the USA.”

⁷ Bailey, “To Read or Not to Read”; Shumway, “The Impact Book Bans Can Have on Youth Mental Health - CBS Pittsburgh.”

⁸ Shumway, “The Impact Book Bans Can Have on Youth Mental Health - CBS Pittsburgh”; DasGupta, “Banning Books Isn’t Just Morally Wrong. It’s Also Unhealthy”; Meehan et al., “Banned in the USA”; Arthushin, LISW-CP, “Why Book Bans Are Bad for Mental Health | Psychology Today.”

⁹ Arthushin, LISW-CP, “Why Book Bans Are Bad for Mental Health | Psychology Today”; DasGupta, “Banning Books Isn’t Just Morally Wrong. It’s Also Unhealthy”; Meehan et al., “Banned in the USA”; Bauer, “Book Bans and Mental Health”; Robles-Ramamurthy, MD, “Book Bans, Racism, and Black Children’s Mental Health.”

¹⁰ The Trevor Project, “2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People.”

¹¹ The Trevor Project.

¹² CDC, “YRBS Explorer (2023).”

Health Literacy and Education

Health literacy **empowers individuals to make informed health decisions.**¹³ Libraries play a vital role in health education, providing access to **credible health information and resources** on topics like **sexual health, mental health, and substance use.**

Not all books that discuss **sex or sexuality are inherently pornographic or obscene.** Books in school libraries are typically chosen by **trained professionals** and provide **age-appropriate, accurate information.**¹⁴ Removing these materials **doesn't protect children – it leaves them uninformed and vulnerable.**

By prohibiting the censorship of library materials, H-5726 ensures that individuals have unrestricted access to accurate and comprehensive health information, empowering them to take control of their health.

Conclusion: The Power of Books

I am an avid reader, and **my StoryGraph account can attest to the fact that I am constantly reading up to 3 or 4 books at a time.** My love for reading was nurtured by my **elementary school librarian,** who led an after-school reading club which introduced me to the **wizarding world of Harry Potter.** Hogwarts became my refuge when my **physical home was unsafe – a place where I learned about resilience, chosen family, and hope in the darkest of times.**

Books like **Solito by Javier Zamora** and **We Are Not From Here by Jenny Torres Sanchez** have given me insight into the **treacherous journey migrant children endure,** a reality I had only heard about through my family. **Stamped by Ibram X. Kendi, Latino Americans by Ray Suarez, Finding LatinX by Paola Ramos, and Transgender History by Susan Stryker** have taught me **the history and identity of this country – history that was never taught to me in school.**

Children and youth deserve to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the pages of books. We must take a stand against censorship and affirm that book bans have no place in Rhode Island.

I urge you to **support and pass H-5726–** because protecting the **freedom to read** also protects the **right to learn, heal, and to belong.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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¹³ World Health Organization, "Health Literacy."

¹⁴ RSEI, "The Troubling Intersection Between Banned Books and Sexual Health."

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