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To: House State Government and Elections Committee; Rep. Shekarchi, K Joseph; Rep. Blazejewski, Christopher R.
Subject: Testimony in Support H5726

I'm John McDaid from Portsmouth. I am a science fiction writer and professor of media theory, and I'm testifying in support of H5726

Humans tell stories. That's how we understand the world.

For on the order of eighty thousand years, stories have shaped our beliefs, our values, and our ability to make sense of life's complexities. When we restrict the stories people can read, we don't just remove books from shelves—we constrict the boundaries of human thought, of empathy, and of understanding.

Now, more than ever, the slow reading that books provide offers an important antidote to the frantic digital world. Many media theorists, including my mentor, Neil Postman, who wrote "Amusing Ourselves to Death," argue that without the counterweight of print, electronic media reduce discourse to entertainment and triviality. It is in all our best interests to support the habits of mind associated with reading.

And we live in Rhode Island, a state founded by Roger Williams on the radical idea that no authority — no government or church — should dictate what a person believes or how they come to their beliefs. The freedom to read is inseparable from the freedom to think and the freedom to discern. When we remove books—especially those that explore different religious traditions, moral questions, or historical perspectives—we violate the very principles that Rhode Island was built upon.

Book challenges are often framed in neutral terms—protecting children, preserving morality—but hidden within many of these efforts are unexamined religious assumptions. Decisions about what ideas are “appropriate” too often reflect one particular worldview, imposed at the expense of all others. True discernment—the ability to critically engage with ideas and make informed choices—requires access to diverse perspectives, not just those that align with a single tradition. The Freedom to Read Act ensures that libraries remain places of exploration, where individuals are free to encounter ideas and decide for themselves what they believe.

To ban books is to betray our own history. We are Rhode Islanders. We do not censor. We trust in the minds of free people to think, question, and grow.

I urge you to uphold the principles on which our state was founded, and support the Freedom to Read Act.

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