

Testimony in Favor of HB 5726
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I support HB 5726.

Librarians are among the top most trusted professionals. One survey showed that “librarians are the second most trusted professionals” after only nurses. “When asked about their perceptions of trustworthiness, more than three-quarters of respondents (78%) rated librarians as ‘very high’ or ‘high.’” According to the same survey, “the least trusted positions include stockbrokers (9%), lobbyists (4%), advertisers (3%), members of Congress (3%), car salespeople (2%), and telemarketers (2%).”

I think librarians are so trusted because they are non-judgmental keepers of information and stories. Our code of ethics states, “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; **and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.**” (bold text added by author)

Libraries suggest resources, but never push our own agendas on anyone. In fact, our code of ethics disallow us from doing so, stating, “**We do not advance private interests** at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.” Our code of ethics continues, “**We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties** and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.” (bold text added by author)

Furthermore, our code of ethics states, “We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. **We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice** in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.”

It is through this lens that we are able to clearly see that book banning attempts in US libraries are not race neutral nor are they perspective neutral. They are often race based. This scarily echoes our tragic history of silencing Black voices through anti-literacy laws which not only prevented enslaved Black people from learning to read and write but also prevented anyone from teaching enslaved Black people to read and write. For example, see the following South Carolina law:

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money

According to Pen America, “[o]f the 4,218 unique banned titles in the 2023-2024 school year, 1,534 or 36% featured fictional characters or real people of color. In analyzing banned history and biography titles alone, PEN America found 44% featured people of color, with 26% of banned historical and biographical titles specifically featuring Black people.” These efforts are not race neutral and we need to send a clear message that Rhode Island is not the place for this.

Please support HB 5726 and please vote it out of committee today. Rhode Island needs to take a stand and become a Freedom to Read state.