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**Statement by Skip Dye, Penguin Random House
Chair, Intellectual Freedom Taskforce
House Committee on State Government & Elections Hearing**

Vote YES on H5726

April 1, 2025

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Penguin Random House and as Chair of our Intellectual Freedom Taskforce. We are expressing our staunch support for Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act H5726, which when passed will be the strongest law in the nation protecting the First Amendment at the state level. In this moment of rising censorship and an unpredictable federal government, Rhode Island will set the national standard for protecting the rights of its citizens.

As the world's largest trade book publisher, Penguin Random House deeply values the freedom to read, a fundamental American right protected by the First Amendment and the Rhode Island Constitution. Our mission is to create books for everyone, and we are proud to publish a wide range of ideas and stories from across the spectrum of identities, viewpoints, and perspectives.

Rising Book Challenges and Censorship

There has been a significant rise in attempts to remove books from schools and libraries. Pen America reported over 10,000 book challenges or bans in the 2023-2024 academic year, a record high—and public libraries saw a 92% increase in censored titles. Even these numbers do not capture the scope of the problem—American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom notes that 82-97% of book challenges are undocumented. Additionally, 71% of voters oppose book bans, and 91% believe others should not control what their families read.

Rhode Island librarians and educators diligently curate their collections to align with the needs, ages, and reading levels of their patrons and students. The process of challenging books diverts resources that libraries could otherwise allocate to community or academic support. A huge portion of book challenges originate from a small cohort of individuals who repeatedly contest the same titles nationwide. Rhode Island has experienced a notable increase in such challenges, primarily directed at literature featuring LGBTQ+ themes, people of color, and other historically marginalized communities.

Protections for Rhode Island Students, Libraries, and Schools

The Freedom to Read bill ensures that residents of Rhode Island have access to a diverse range of ideas and information. This legislation aligns Rhode Island law with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as well as Section 21 of the Rhode Island Constitution. S0238 strengthens and standardizes library guidelines for acquisition and review, ensuring librarians and educators can select age-relevant materials for all readers. It prevents censorship efforts by external parties by mandating that individuals who want to contest library materials must reside in the library's service area or be students at the school.

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The Freedom to Read bill safeguards libraries and schools against baseless legal actions by awarding legal fees to institutions that prevail in censorship lawsuits. This legislation requires individuals seeking to ban books to bear the financial costs associated with their legal challenges. Additionally, the Freedom to Read bill shields librarians, teachers, and museum employees from civil and criminal charges for materials available in their collections. This aligns Rhode Island with all other New England states that have protections for library workers for work performed as part of their job.

Support for Rhode Island's Creative Economy

The Freedom to Read bill champions Rhode Island's vibrant creative economy by safeguarding the rights to free expression for businesses and creators. It enshrines the existing federal Miller test standards in state law to define obscenity for both adults and minors. This bill ensures that no book can be censored based on its ideology or identity of the content or its creator, thereby nurturing and protecting the diverse voices that contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of Rhode Island.

Maintains Decision-Making Power for Educators and Parents

The Freedom to Read bill maintains decision-making power for parents, allowing them to guide their child's reading without dictating the reading choices of other children. It maintains the principles of the First Amendment and anti-discrimination laws, ensuring that all libraries are places of learning, inclusion, and open discourse—not areas for ideological censorship. It confirms that students in Rhode Island have the right to read, think independently, and engage with literature that represents the diversity of their world.

Affirm Rhode Island's Commitment to Free Speech, Freedom to Read Act H5726

We urge you to support and vote Yes for the Rhode Island's Freedom to Read Act H5726. It protects our rights to read and to be read freely. This bill ensures creators can express their ideas without censorship, fostering a richly diverse literary culture.

Sincerely,

Skip Dye
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SVP, Library Sales & Digital Strategy

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