

Steven Sepe

From: Tasha White <noreply@adv.actionnetwork.org>
Sent: Sunday, March 30, 2025 9:52 PM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Subject: Support for HB #5726: RI Freedom to Read Act

Committee State Government Clerk,

In Favor of HB #5726 – The Freedom to Read Act

Hello,

My name is Tasha White, and I am the Library Media Specialist at Alfred Lima Elementary School in Providence. Our school serves nearly 700 multilingual K-5 students, including those in inclusion and dual-language classrooms. Every day, I see the impact that books have on our students—the way they spark curiosity, foster understanding, and help children see themselves and others in new ways.

Yet, across the country, and even here in Rhode Island, we see efforts to ban books from our schools and libraries. Books like *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson, which reminds us that while we all have differences, we also share common experiences. Some people found this book "objectionable" because it discusses race and cultural identity. But isn't that the point? That we can disagree, that we can have discussions—but that no one person should get to decide what others are allowed to read?

We tell our students to think for themselves, to analyze information critically, and to question biases. Yet, when we ban books, we are teaching them the opposite—that a few voices can silence many, that discomfort is a reason to erase perspectives, and that certain stories don't deserve to be told.

What's especially troubling is that, while we attempt to limit access to carefully curated, educator-approved books, students still have unlimited access to the vast and often unfiltered world of the internet. As a librarian, I teach my students that anyone can publish online and that over 70% of online content is not suitable for children. Yet, some of the same people who worry about the messages in books are not asking the same questions about what their children encounter every day on their screens.

Books are not randomly placed on library shelves. They are carefully selected by trained professionals—librarians who ensure that all voices are represented, that all children can find themselves in stories, and that they can also see through windows into the lives of others. That is how we build empathy. That is how we prepare students for a world far beyond their

own experiences.

I have seen firsthand the power of books. My own son, who has ADHD and struggled to connect with reading, discovered his love for books through Captain Underpants—a series that has also been banned in some places. Without it, he may never have found that joy, that success, that spark.

We do not all have to agree with every book. Parents have every right to decide what is best for their children. But no small group should get to decide for everyone's children.

The Day You Begin tells us that, "There will be times when you walk into a room and no one there is quite like you... until the day you begin to share your stories."

So I ask you—who are we to say which stories deserve to be heard?

Please, support the Freedom to Read Act, HB #5726. Let's ensure that all children, in all communities, have the right to explore, to learn, and to see themselves in the stories that shape their world.

Thank you.

Tasha White:)

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