

# *The First Baptist Church in America*

*The Birthplace of America's Religious Freedom*

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Greetings Representatives,

April 3, 2025

I am the Rev. Dr. Jamie P. Washam, a member and senior minister of the First Baptist Church in America, gathered by Roger Williams in 1638. Our congregation is also a member of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches. I write in support of House Bill 5726, the "Freedom to Read" Bill sponsored by Representatives Morales, Stewart, Paplauskas, Boylan, Carson, Cotter, Ajello, Speakman, Handy, and Kislak.

Roger Williams founded Rhode Island and gathered our congregation on the bedrock of soul liberty. He knew first-hand the harm caused by censorship and limitations on intellectual freedoms. Banning books in our libraries is antithetical to American civic values, inconsistent with the primary mission of public education and detrimental to the social-emotional development of students.

At times, the Bible and other sacred texts have been censored. This is antithetical to our values of free speech and religious liberty in Rhode Island and in the United States. As the parent of a minor, I advocate for the freedom to read in both public school and community libraries. A person can choose to restrict what they read or what their child might have access to read, but they do not have the right to dictate or censor what is available to others.

From the inception of our nation, public education served to prepare informed and capable citizens who are functionally competent in life skills. Schools need to be both inclusive and protected from sectarian and majoritarian interference. Schools are where all children can express themselves as individuals, recognizing each other's differences as they learn to work together.

Our nation's founders recognized the importance of a free exchange of ideas to a self-governing pluralistic society. Engaging in civic dialogue and making decisions requires freely available information. Our founders understood the free exchange of ideas as necessary for the strength and stability of society. Restricting access to diverse ideas or obscuring segments of history significantly distorts the process of a society's self-understanding and well-being. I support the passage of this bill. Please stand up for our common freedoms and do so as well.

Peace,



The Reverend Dr. Jamie P. Washam  
Senior Minister of the First Baptist Church in America  
Commissioner of RI State Council of Churches  
Resident, Lincoln, RI



*"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." Gal. 5:1*