

My name is Sam Wallace. I am a Providence resident, a Providence Public School librarian, and a URI graduate from the Masters in Library and Information Studies program and I am writing in support of House Bill 5836.

As a school librarian I wholeheartedly back this bill and its protection and advocacy for inclusive and protective curriculum, as well as for a real investment in student and educator voices. Our students will be more engaged when they see that what they are learning about reflects the lived experience of their family members of their communities. There is a body of research highlighting the importance of “windows mirrors and sliding glass doors” championed by Rudine Sims Bishop in which students learn from experiences that reflect their own or open their worldview to those different from them. Although test scores are not a measure I agree with, student test scores and engagement with material go up when they see themselves in their classwork.

We have a disproportionate amount of white educators in Providence that are not representative of our student population neither in race nor ethnicity, nor in our language abilities or nationalities. This curriculum is necessary. It is not enough to rely on the good intentions of a handful of teachers and educators who then may face consequences for teaching outside of or expanding curriculum.

This bill shows our students that they are a priority. This bill tells our students and our community that their history and experiences are critical and need attention and time in our school year. This bill is an important step forward and dismantling some of the racist infrastructure embedded in our schools.

It is a time of increased book bans, teacher displacement and non-renewals, and a rise in fascism nationally and across the globe. Ethnic studies will prepare our students for understanding how this political movement exists within a broader historical context. It will give students the tools they need to lead us through this. It will give students the stories and the strategies and the analysis to understand not only white American history but a full and complex history, one that doesn't exclude marginalized groups or limit them to one holiday or one month or one historical figure. When students see themselves in their schoolwork, they want to learn. They understand why it matters. We don't need to worry about shaping and reshaping our learning targets, our big “whys” and our essential questions when students are invested in learning the material. As a teacher, my students have asked for this history and I have patched-work together my own versions of this. To have broad support through an educator and student implementation team means that we are more efficient, prepared, and able to provide high quality curriculum as an education community.

We need ethnic studies. This moment is not a time to cower or self-silence or self-censor. We need our leadership to take a bold stand in supporting this work. Students are watching. We demand that you respect our students and our communities by passing House Bill 5836. Thank you!