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Testimony Re: H-5726 An Act Relating to Libraries -- The Freedom to Read Act

House State Government and Elections Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 5726. We would like to thank Representative Morales for sponsoring this important bill and Representatives Stewart, Paplauskas, Boylan, Carson, Cotter, Ajello, Speakman, Handy, and Kislak for co-sponsoring. This bill would establish the *Freedom to Read Act* and would promote free expression and free access of information by prohibiting the censorship of library materials. This act requires the creation of a model policy relative to library material within a public library and school library.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution expressly protects the freedoms of speech, press, peaceable assembly, and petition to the Government. An attempt to remove or restrict access to materials based upon the objections of a person or group is an infringement of First Amendment rights to free speech. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom reports that during 2023, there were challenges to 4,240 individual book titles, as well as 1,247 demands to censor library books, materials, and resources. Since not all challenges to titles or materials are documented, this may very well be an undercount.

It is critically important for our students and all citizens to have access to culturally relevant and historically accurate books and materials that reflect and celebrate the identity of these individuals, which can have a positive impact on school climate, student engagement, academic outcomes, and civic engagement. Rhode Island's student population is increasingly diverse, and this diversity is an incredible asset to our public schools. In October 2023, 49% of Rhode Island public schools students were Students of Color. Additionally, according to the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 17.5% of high school students in Rhode Island described themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, 5.2% described themselves as other and 4.8% as questioning. Among high school students, 3.9% described themselves as transgender.

Reading increases our perspectives on the world around us which improves both self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Reading books that have characters who might share similar identities/backgrounds to the reader can offer them a sense of validation and allow them to gain a deeper understanding of their own self and experiences.

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House Bill 5726 seeks to establish into Rhode Island law that the freedom to read is a human right, constitutionally protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, that individuals have the right to free speech, free inquiry, and the right to form and express their own opinions and to promote the free expression of and free access to information and the marketplace of ideas by prohibiting the censorship of library material. This act would provide these protections in both public and school libraries, and we urge passage. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.