

To: Senator Hanna M. Gallo, Chair
RI Senate Education Committee
From: Esther Wolk, SLRI President
Supporting bill 2026 -- S 2078
Date: 3/4/2026

Dear Senator Hanna M. Gallo and members of the RI Senate Education Committee,

I am writing in support of bill 2026 -- S 2078, The School Libraries Act. This is my 28th year as a school librarian in Coventry and I currently serve as the president of School Librarians of Rhode Island (SLRI).

I would like to tell you about my experience as a school librarian as an example of what is happening in RI. Twenty-eight years ago, I was hired as a full-time librarian in an elementary school. After five years I had the opportunity to move to a full-time position in a middle school. Three years later the middle school was closed and I was moved to the high school as one of two full-time librarians with a full-time clerk. During these ten years, I taught students: how to use the library, how to access information, how to determine if a website is credible, how to present and cite information for a class project. I also collaborated with teachers to make sure they had materials and technology for their classes.

At the end of my first decade as a school librarian, changes were made to the RI BEP. The section about school libraries no longer had staffing or budget requirements. The BEP no longer had concrete guidelines, and instead it became ambiguous and open to each school district's interpretation. My job at the high school was eliminated. Instead of two full-time librarians and a full-time clerk, there was only one full-time librarian, then a part-time librarian, eventually being cut to a .2 FTE position.

This year my position is every other day at the middle school and every other day at the high school. I am not a librarian at the high school. I am assigned to data collection and supervision of an MTSS program for students who are in the Math or Reading program because they have failed Math or ELA. I am not certified as a Math or ELA teacher. The library is not open for student use and I do not have time in my schedule to collaborate with teachers. Although on paper the high school has a .5 FTE librarian, I am assigned to another role in the school. The high school's library is just another space for events and it is not being kept up to date. The average publication date of the books in the high school's library collection is 1992. The students and staff don't have access to a librarian, and only 212 books have been borrowed this school year. At the middle school it is slightly better, and on paper the middle school also has a .5 FTE librarian. I am assigned to other roles in the middle school for half of each day that I work there, and each time that I am assigned to another role, the students and staff lose access to a librarian. The middle school's library is also used as another space for events and is not being kept up to date. The average publication date of the books in the library's collection is 2006, and only 1,025 books have been borrowed this school year.

By making the regulations for school libraries vague and giving school districts the ability to decide whether they have libraries and librarians, Rhode Island is doing a disservice to students and teachers. In Newport there is no longer a librarian in the elementary school. In Pawtucket, Tiverton, and Cumberland there are no longer middle school librarians. Tiverton also lacks a high school librarian. In addition, there are unqualified emergency certified librarians filling open positions around the state.

School librarians are among the few staff members who positively impact the entire school community. We teach: Media Literacy, Information Literacy, STEAM, AI and Digital Citizenship. We play an important role in lifelong learning. Being able to navigate a library's print and digital resources and safely locate reliable information on the internet are skills that our students will need for the rest of their lives.

Please support Senate bill 2026 -- S 2078, The School Libraries Act so all public schools in RI are required to have a designated space within the school for an updated library with a full-time, certified and degreed school librarian at its helm. All students deserve to have their recreational reading and research needs met by a full-time certified librarian. All teachers deserve to have a colleague who is a trained expert on information literacy, media literacy, technology, and children's and young adult literature.

Sincerely,

Esther Wolk, MLIS, MEd
President
School Libraries of Rhode Island