



BUILDING A FREEDOM TO READ COALITION

Lessons from Rhode Island's Fight Against Book Bans

WHITE PAPER | Edited by **Nicole P. Dyszlewski** | October 2026

A user-friendly white paper on coalition building, legislative advocacy, public engagement, and anticensorship strategy, using Rhode Island as a case study.

Includes examples, resources, and advocacy materials in the appendix.

1. Note to Reader: Nicole Dyszlewski
2. Introduction: Nicole P. Dyszlewski
3. The Librarian Perspective: Ed Garcia
4. The Law Perspective: Dan Novack
5. The Author Perspective: Jeanette Bradley and Padma Venkatraman
6. The Advocacy Perspective: Skip Dye
7. The Holistic Perspective: Rosie Stewart
8. The Psychologist Perspective: Margaret Paccione
9. The Religious Perspective: Eugene T. Dyszlewski
10. Conclusion and Thanks: Nicole Dyszlewski
11. Appendix: Sample Documents

Note to Reader:

A white paper is generally either authoritative or written by experts or both.

This paper is not authoritative.

And while this paper is written by a team of experts, it is not written by experts in legislative advocacy in your state.

Instead, this paper is an archival remix of love, sweat, library expertise, legal knowledge, and a pinch of Rhode Island flavor.

The editor and authors do not claim what worked in our state will work in yours, but we did learn so much along the way that we wanted to share our journey and insights and mistakes with those who will come after us in anti-book censorship advocacy.

Introduction

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski

Overview

In 2025, Rhode Island passed the most progressive and protective Freedom to Read legislation among the states that have passed such legislation. This was an unqualified victory for those of us who advocated for this bill and those of us who support the first amendment and the power of story, art, access, and democracy.

Having had a few months space from this advocacy effort, it feels important for us to share this story. Not just in an archival sense so we can remember it and reflect back on it. And not just as a celebration of it, although the people and organizations who made this happen are worth celebrating. But as a roadmap for those who are looking to advocate for the passage of a freedom to read bill, or a more protective freedom to read bill, in another state.

As such, this white paper will tell the story of our bill's path from seedling idea to enacted law. It will tell this story from a diversity of perspectives, none of which alone tell the whole story, but each together, with substantial supported documents and ephemera in the appendix, hope to provide insights and takeaways which may (and hopefully are) helpful to those who come after us.

This is the story of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Coalition told through the lens of several different lens. We invite you into our story to learn from our successes, our struggles, and our unfinished work.

Who We Are

The Rhode Freedom to Read Coalition is a grassroots advocacy effort and collaboration of individuals and organizations which formed in 2025 as an attempt to gain passage of a freedom to read law in Rhode Island. It has no bylaws or articles of incorporation. It is, in the words of Margaret Mead, a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens who wanted to change the world in a specific way at a specific time in history.

There were about 125 email addresses on our mailing list, but many of these email addresses were from organizations that were officially (or unofficially) part of the work. The conclusion of this paper will list the names of the organizations who were coalition members.

We have no real hierarchy, but for the purposes of efficiency we did have a few committees and formed a de facto executive committee which did a lot of the day to day work. At some point it was necessary to have a spokesperson, so one of us stepped up as the self-appointed leader.

This paper is written by some of the members of this coalition. As such, you will find that like the coalition itself, some of the authors of this paper are seasoned advocates. Others are not. Some are professional librarians. Others are not. Some are lawyers. Others are not. All of the authors of this paper are members of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Coalition and are members of the community who helped support and advocate for this bill passage.

Organization

The paper will unfold as a series of essays told from the perspective of individual authors.

The first essay presented is the librarian perspective of the coalition and its work as told by Ed Garcia, Library Director of the Cranston Public Library, and then co-chair of the Rhode Island Library Association Legislative Action Committee. He will recount the local history of the advocacy efforts prior and leading up to the formation of the coalition.

The second essay presented is by Dan Novack, first amendment attorney and Associate General Counsel at Penguin Random House. His essay about the coalition told from the legal perspective.

The third essay is presented by Jeanette Bradley and Padma Venkatraman. They were co-leaders of the Rhode Island chapter of Authors Against Book Bans. The essay they wrote is told from the perspective of authors and illustrators.

The fourth essay is penned by Skip Dye SVP & Director, Sales Operations of Penguin Random House. This essay will speak broadly about advocacy and what he has seen work in Rhode Island and beyond.

The next essay is looking at coalition advocacy from a holistic perspective and making sure to include all stakeholders in a freedom to read advocacy effort, especially authors and content creators. This essay is written by Rosie Stewart, Senior Manager for Public Policy at Penguin Random House and chair of the PRH Intellectual Freedom Taskforce.

The next essay is written by Dr. Margaret Paccione, Director, Clinical Innovation, Bradley Hospital and Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior The Warren Alpert Medical School Brown University.

The final perspective essay is written by Rev. Eugene T. Dyszlewski, minister of Lime Rock Baptist Church and legislative advocate at the Rhode Island Council of Churches. This essay is a discrete example of a religious perspective on the freedom to read and represents a type of viewpoint that maybe overlooked in coalition building on a “library issue” and is a great example of how the previous essay is intended to work on the ground.

The next section of the paper will include robust takeaways about what we have learned and would want others to know as they go forward in their own legislative advocacy work.

The paper then concludes with an appendix of example documents which can be repurposed as templates for the work ahead.

Conclusion

The most fundamentally important takeaway from this coalition effort shouldn't be relegated to the conclusion of this white paper. It is this: the freedom to read is not just a "librarian issue." It is an American value. The quicker this lesson is learned and incorporated into your work, the easier ahead.

Biographical Note: Ed Garcia

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

Ed Garcia is the Library Director of the Cranston Public Library System.

Ed has the job of a library director but the soul of a library advocate and has been working for years to move the work of libraries forward at both the federal and state levels. He served as Chair of the Rhode Island Library Association (RILA) Legislative Action Committee (2016-2025) and the American Library Association (ALA) Committee on Legislation, including a three-year term as committee chair (2021-2025).¹

Ed worked in marketing with Sony Music in the 90s and he has a transferable skill set which allows him to excel at talking about the power and importance of libraries. This sounds simple, but many librarians (self included) struggle with this because, well, the power and importance of libraries is so obvious to us.

Ed is not just someone good at marketing. He is strategic, deeply involved in the librarianship community, and remarkable at building and maintaining relationships (I met him in 2010 when I was in library school and have stayed in contact with him this entire time). Without Ed's deep knowledge of librarianship, advocacy, and prior legislative relationships, our coalition would not have been the success it was.

¹ Director Bio, [Cranston Public Library](#) (last visited June 13, 2026).

The Librarian Perspective

The History of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act with Lessons Learned

By Ed Garcia

Every day, libraries do the quiet, essential work of democracy. We build community not by telling people what to think, but by creating spaces where thinking is possible. We connect neighbors to one another. We provide free and equitable access to information to all members of the community and ensure that everyone in the community is reflected in our collections. We support locally driven goals and values not by imposing them, but by giving people the tools, the information, and the room to shape those values together. The work to support the Freedom to Read legislation grew directly out of this mission.

The Freedom to Read is a core value of librarianship enshrined in both the *Library Bill of Rights* and *Core Values of Librarianship*, foundational documents of the American Library Association (ALA).

The Challenge Emerges

The journey towards passage of the Freedom to Read Act began in 2022, as so much library work does, at the local level with our meeting rooms, with challenged books, and with a small but organized group of far-right activists. Several incidents early in the year showed that the “culture wars” that were sweeping the nation had come to Rhode Island schools and libraries.

In January, intended to be used as a play in one of the classrooms, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel was removed from the Jacqueline M. Walsh (High) School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Pawtucket, RI after a complaint from a single parent.¹

At a February school committee meeting in North Smithfield, RI a small group of parents called for the removal of over a dozen books from school libraries including Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, and Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*² among others. The books were retained by the district.

In June, parents challenged the inclusion of *Were I Not a Girl: The Inspiring and True Story of Dr. James Barry* by Lisa Robinson, *A Place Inside of Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart* by Zetta Elliot and *Feed Your Mind: A Story of August Wilson* by Jen Bryant and Cannaday Chapman in elementary school

¹ Abigail Judson, *Play Is removed from Pawtucket Classroom After Parent Complains*, Valley Breeze (Jan. 12, 2022), https://www.valleybreeze.com/news/play-is-removed-from-pawtucket-classroom-after-parent-complains/article_7c1dc8d4-724f-11ec-aba3-03168dfa4039.html.

² Vivian Trutzl, *Parents Call for Books’ Removal Due to ‘Alarming’ Content*, Valley Breeze (Feb. 24, 2022), https://www.valleybreeze.com/news/parents-call-for-books-removal-due-to-alarming-content/article_dfd6620-9351-11ec-89cc-e7b61e3394cd.html.

libraries in Smithfield, RI. The school committee voted to retain the books.³

In September, the Cranston Public Library was embroiled in a major controversy surrounding an anti-trans group that reserved a room for a “gender ideology” meeting. There was fierce community pushback towards the library for allowing the meeting to take place, including a massive protest on the front lawn of the William Hall Library.⁴

We had to educate the public (and many of our own staff) about the principles of intellectual freedom and the freedom of speech. As the *Library Bill of Rights* states, “Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.”⁵ In other words, if we allow the public to use library meeting spaces, we must be viewpoint neutral in doing so.

As a result of the meeting room controversy, The Cranston Public Library Board of Trustees decided to temporarily halt use of the meeting room⁶ and embark on a major revision of the meeting room policy.⁷ Although the viewpoint neutrality at the core of the policy remained intact, more guidance and clarification about room usage was needed. One of the main sources of public confusion was that, while outside groups may use library meeting rooms, their meetings are not library-sponsored and do not represent the library’s endorsement of their views or content.

As controversy arose over the use of a public meeting space—and as more titles including *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe were targeted for removal from school libraries in several Rhode Island communities—it became clear these were not isolated incidents.

They were part of a broader effort to narrow whose stories could be told, whose experiences could be shared, and whose presence in public life would be affirmed. Libraries are often the first place where

³ Jacquelyn Moorehead, “Smithfield Allows Contentious Books into School Libraries,” Valley Breeze (June 9, 2022), https://www.valleybreeze.com/news/smithfield-allows-contentious-books-into-school-libraries/article_97e598c8-e697-11ec-bb82-8344584001de.html.

⁴ Amanda Milkovits, “Anti-Transgender Group Sparks Anger, Protests at Event at Cranston Library,” Boston Globe (Sept. 19, 2022), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/09/19/metro/anti-transgender-group-sparks-anger-protests-event-cranston-library/>.

⁵ *Library Bill of Rights*, Am. Libr. Ass’n (Jan.29, 2019), <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>.

⁶ Amanda Milkovits, *Cranston Library Suspends Use of Meeting Space Pending Policy Review*, Boston Globe (Sept. 23, 2022), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/09/23/metro/cranston-library-suspends-use-meeting-space-pending-policy-review/>.

⁷ *Meeting Room Policy*, Cranston Public Library (rev. Feb.11, 2026), <https://www.cranstonlibrary.org/policies/meeting-room-policy/>.

these pressures surface because libraries are where the public gathers. Libraries are where ideas meet people in real time.

Some of the same people who held the anti-trans meeting in Cranston challenged the inclusion of *Gender Queer* in local high school libraries in Westerly and North Kingstown, RI. When those challenges were unsuccessful, criminal complaints alleging the book was obscene under R.I. obscenity statutes, were filed with the local police, the R.I. State Police, and the Attorney General.⁸ Although those complaints were also unsuccessful, they did instill a sense of growing fear among Rhode Island librarians.

Identifying the Legal Gap and First Steps Towards Legislation

By fortuitous happenstance, the New England Library Association (NELA) was hosting an all-day program entitled “Legal Issues for Libraries: Privacy, Spaces, Patrons & Content Seminar.” The featured speaker was Tomas Lipinski, J.D. LL.M. M.L.I.S., PhD., from the School of Information Studies University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Members of my team and I traveled along with other library advocates to New Hampshire to attend the seminar and consult with Dr. Lipinski to inform the meeting room policy revision. But during the seminar, an important fact was uncovered.

In New England, Rhode Island stood alone as the only state without clear protections in its obscenity law for libraries and educational institutions.⁹ Across the country, 44 other states had these protections in place, although there was an effort in several to repeal them.¹⁰ That absence left library workers, trustees, and educators exposed to intimidation and unwarranted criminal charges.

Addressing that gap was not about unnecessarily shielding institutions; it was about ensuring that the public could continue to access information without fear, and that library workers could do their jobs without the threat of legal penalties or political reprisal.

My colleagues from the Rhode Island Library Association (RILA) legislative action committee and I began work on a bill for the 2023 legislative session to address this disparity in Rhode Island

⁸ Amanda Milkovits, *Libraries face increased attempts to ban books*, Boston Globe (Sept. 23, 2022), <https://www.boston-globe.com/2022/09/23/metro/libraries-face-increased-attempts-ban-books/>.

⁹ Tomas Lipinski, *NELA States Content Regulation Statutes* (Oct. 22, 2022) (unpublished presentation, Legal Issues for Libraries: Privacy, Spaces, Patrons & Content Seminar, Hanover, NH).

¹⁰ John Chrastka, *Opposing Attempts to Criminalize Libraries and Education Through State Obscenity Laws*, EveryLibrary Inst. (2023), https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/opposing_attempts_policy_brief_2023.

law. Based on language from Wisconsin state law¹¹, our first bill H 6066¹², added long overdue affirmative defense protections for library workers, educators, and museums to Rhode Island obscenity statutes.¹³

The inclusion of museums reflected the broader understanding that cultural institutions (including libraries, schools, and museums) share a public mission of preserving access to knowledge, history, and educational materials. However, as the legislative process progressed, it became clear that each sector's ability to advocate for itself mattered. While libraries and schools had organized advocacy networks that could mobilize supporters and provide testimony, museums did not have the same level of coordinated grassroots engagement. As a result, museums were ultimately removed from later versions of the legislation.

The bill included language based on the example of the Wisconsin statute that clearly stated the legislative intent, or the purpose of the legislation. The text included the finding that “Libraries and educational institutions carry out the essential purpose of making available to all citizens a current balanced collection...that reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society.” The finding further states, “It is in the interest of the state to protect the financial resources of libraries and educational institutions” from baseless claims.

The bill also expanded on the Miller Test¹⁴ adding “educational” and “governmental” to the list used to determine obscenity. H6066 was introduced in the House by Representative David Morales (Democrat, District 7, Providence). We built a small coalition of organizational support including the ACLU of Rhode Island, the Womxn Project, and the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals. There were also letters of support from several academic labor unions including the University of Rhode Island chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

During the same legislative session, another bill was introduced by Representative Samuel Azzinaro (Democrat, District 37, Westerly) that attempted to amend the same R.I. obscenity statutes. Introduced during National Library Week, H 6324¹⁵ explicitly sought to criminalize the work of

¹¹ Wis. Stat. §§ 944.21(8), 948.11 (4) (2025-26).

¹² H.B. 6066, 2023 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2023).

¹³ R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 11-31-1, -10 (2026).

¹⁴ In *Miller v. California*, The Supreme Court established the three-part test to determine whether material constitutes unprotected obscenity under the First Amendment: (1) Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work appeals to prurient interest; (2) Whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable state law; (3) Whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 24 (1973).

¹⁵ H.B. 6324, 2023 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2023).

librarians by adding language that specifically targeted public and school libraries with criminal penalties. Under this bill, library workers would be open to a fine of up to \$1,000 and two years in prison if convicted on obscenity charges. The bill also appeared to single out *Gender Queer* by allowing cartoons, drawings, or animated formats to be classified as potentially obscene.¹⁶ The public outcry in opposition to this bill was immediate¹⁷ and the bill did not even receive a hearing. It was clear that the content of the bill was engineered by the same far-right activists mentioned previously, some of whom were constituents of Rep. Azzinaro in Westerly. They made an effort in Westerly¹⁸ and nearby Hopkinton¹⁹ to pass resolutions in the respective town councils in support of the resolution. Those efforts were also defeated in part due to the testimony of library advocates.

Advocates now had to engage at the municipal level to defend the freedom to read. Although RILA routinely monitored state level legislation, there was no system in place to monitor agendas of school committees or city and town councils. A last-minute mobilization of local advocates helped defeat these resolutions. However, a better system to monitor activity at the local level was needed.

Although the bill was received positively by most members of the House Judiciary Committee, H 6066 stalled in committee and was “held for further study,” a phrase that Freedom to Read advocates would come to know well. Despite this setback several lessons were learned. First, we failed to have a companion bill introduced in the R.I. Senate. That oversight severely limited our avenues for advocacy and the pathways to passage. Second, we learned that the advocacy effort was limited by not having more voices of supporters across the state. Efforts to recruit more partners and build a coalition would only grow stronger. Previously library advocacy efforts at the state house had not engaged with the general public or other potential stakeholders in any significant way. Most of RILA’s previous legislative efforts had been focused on full funding of state aid to libraries as proscribed in Chapter 6 of Title 29 of the Rhode Island General Laws.²⁰ Those efforts were typically done by lobbying behind the scenes through meetings with legislative leadership. A new approach was needed with more engagement with the public and stakeholder groups with an interest in the freedom to read, free speech, and the freedom of expression.

¹⁶ Current R.I. statute requires an actual depiction to be considered potentially obscene. R.I. Gen. Laws § 11-31-1 (2026).

¹⁷ Alex Nunes, *New Bill Would Hold RI School Libraries Liable for ‘Obscene’ Material*, R.I. Pub. Radio (Apr. 27, 2023), <https://thepublicsradio.org/article/new-bill-would-hold-ri-school-libraries-liable-for-obscene-material/>.

¹⁸ Alex Nunes, *Westerly Town Council Rejects Resolution Backing Library Obscenity Bill*, R.I. Pub. Radio (June 6, 2023), <https://thepublicsradio.org/article/westerly-town-council-rejects-resolution-backing-library-obscenity-bill/>.

¹⁹ Hopkinton Town Council, Meeting Minutes (June 5, 2023), https://www.hopkintonri.gov/sites/g/files/vyhli8546/f/minutes/town_council_minutes_june_5_2023.pdf.

²⁰ R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 29-6-1 to -11 (2026).

Refining Legislative Strategy

As the push for legislative protections continued, so did censorship incidents in libraries. While the Cranston Public Library received no formal requests for reconsideration during the 2022-2023 period, staff documented several incidents of targeted vandalism and destruction of library materials that appeared to be motivated by disagreement with the content or viewpoint of those materials.

These incidents included the removal of spine labels from the children's books *Identity and Gender* by Charlie Ogden and *LGBTQ Rights Uncovering the Past* by Natalie Hyde (to, we assume, impede discoverability of the books on the shelves), hateful written defacement of a memoir by local transgender author Connelly Akstens, and the destruction or theft of copies of the Rhode Island Catholic newspaper at multiple branch locations.

Although these incidents did not constitute formal challenges under library policy, they represented informal attempts to interfere with public access to library resources. These incidents were reported to both the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and the Cranston Police Department. Defacing and vandalizing library materials is explicitly illegal by R.I. statute.²¹ Also since under Rhode Island law, if a crime was motivated by the perpetrator's hatred or animus of a protected group (disability, religion, color, race, national origin or ancestry, gender, or sexual orientation), a sentencing enhancement might apply under the Hate Crimes Sentencing Act.²² The Cranston Police forwarded their reports on these incidents to the R.I. Attorney General's Civil Rights Unit.

During this time, there were also increased complaints about Rainbow Book Month displays and social media activity denouncing the inclusion of *Gender Queer* in Cranston Public Library collections. It should be noted that *Gender Queer* was located in the adult readers collections.

In 2024 our legislative efforts continued, this time advancing both renewed obscenity protections bills and a separate Freedom to Read bill for public libraries in both chambers of the General Assembly. The protections bills were H 7575²³ introduced again by Rep. Morales and S 2429²⁴ introduced by Senator Mark McKenney (Democrat, District 30, Warwick). The bills were nearly identical to the 2023 obscenity protections bill. The only difference was the removal of 'governmental' as an addition to the Miller Test. Since political speech was already included, the addition of 'governmental' was deemed redundant.

²¹ R.I. Gen. Laws § 11-44-15 (2002).

²² R.I. Gen. Laws § 12-19-38 (2002).

²³ H.B. 7575, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2024).

²⁴ S.B. 2429, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2024).

In consultation with the R.I. Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS), the RILA legislative action committee crafted a Freedom to Read bill that was separate from the obscenity statutes. The bill focused on public libraries by amending Title 29 of the Rhode Island General Laws²⁵ and effectively established as state policy that banning, censoring, or removing materials due to political or doctrinal disapproval was prohibited. Because Title 29 primarily addresses public libraries, our strategy at the time was to amend the existing statute to first protect public libraries and then pursue protections for school libraries, as no existing statutes specifically addressed school libraries. The decision was made not to follow the example of a recently passed anti-book banning law in Illinois.²⁶ Although the Illinois law requires public and school libraries to adopt the Library Bill of Rights, it ties censorship restrictions to state funding for libraries. We were concerned about potential unintended consequences of placing restrictions on state library funding in our efforts.

The Freedom to Read bills were H 7386²⁷ which was introduced by Representative Jennifer Stewart (Democrat, District 59, Pawtucket) with Rep. Morales as the primary co-sponsor and S 2281²⁸ which was introduced by Senator McKenney.

Both H 7575 (protections) and H 7386 (Freedom to Read) were held for further study in the House Judiciary and House State Government and Elections committees, respectively. But in the Senate, we achieved our greatest success to date. Both S 2429 (protections) and S 2281 (Freedom to Read) passed out of their respective committees and were given a vote with the full Senate. S 2429 was passed out of the Senate Judiciary committee with a Sub A.²⁹ Some of the bill language was changed but the affirmative defense protections remained intact. The legislative intent that was included in the bill text was shortened. The acknowledgement of the important role of libraries and educational institutions was removed, however the language about protecting funding from litigation was retained along with the affirmative defense language.

Both bills passed the full Senate with a 31-5 vote. However, since it was nearing the end of the legislative session, the House did not take them up for consideration.

Although we were disappointed by this outcome we learned more valuable lessons. First, having multiple related bills was a bad idea. It was exceedingly difficult to coordinate our partner organizations and members of the RILA legislative action committee to attend and testify at multiple

²⁵ R.I. Gen. Laws tit. 29 (2026).

²⁶ Ill. Pub. Act 103-0100 (2023).

²⁷ H.B. 7386, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2024).

²⁸ S.B. 2281, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2024).

²⁹ S.B. 2429 Substitute A, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2024).

hearings with little notice. RILA had an ambitious legislative agenda that year and also worked to introduce bills to fully fund state aid to public libraries (which was achieved!), require fair eBook pricing from publishers, and require school librarians in every public and charter school in the state. We were determined to have one omnibus Freedom to Read bill in 2025.

Second, although the legislation codified the Freedom to Read, there were no penalties for those who censored books in our libraries and no remedies for those whose works were censored or for those who faced discipline or termination for refusing to censor.

Third, in hindsight the strategy of staggered advocacy for public and school libraries was not sound. Book challenges continued in school libraries around the state while challenges in public libraries were limited. Although school libraries were included in the protections bills it was evident that school libraries needed to be included more explicitly in any future Freedom to Read bill. We saw increased testimony and support at the hearings for these bills from new partners including the Rhode Island Council of Churches, the Rhode Island Atheists, the National Association of Government Employees, and the Association of American Publishers.

After the outpouring of individual and organizational support it became apparent that the Freedom to Read was not solely a library issue but was a democracy issue, and broad coalition support would be needed to ensure passage.

More support began to coalesce moving into the 2025 legislative session. Connections made at the ALA Intellectual Freedom Summit³⁰ in Washington D.C. brought us into contact with the recently launched R.I. chapter of Authors Against Book Bans. Soon after Penguin Random House joined our growing coalition. The addition and active participation of the authors and publishers would transform the Freedom to Read coalition.

The decision was made to combine the goals of the obscenity protections bills and the Freedom to Read into one omnibus bill. We reviewed legislation recently passed in New Jersey³¹ and model language provided by the Freedom to Learn Advocates (FTLA)³² in crafting the new “Freedom to Read Act.” This more comprehensive bill contained the amendments adding protections to the state obscenity statutes and also went much further to defend the Freedom to Read than previous versions did. The proposed legislation defined censorship, created model policies for both public and school libraries for collection development and reconsideration of library materials, added strong

³⁰ Sanhita SinhaRoy, *We Are the Majority: A Report from the ALA Intellectual Freedom Summit*, American Libraries (Sept. 19, 2024), <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/latest-links/we-are-the-majority-a-report-from-alas-intellectual-freedom-summit/>.

³¹ N.J. Stat. Ann. §§ 18A:34A-1 to -8 (West 2026).

³² Right to Read Legislation, Freedom to Learn Advocates, <https://www.ftla.org/right-to-read-legislation/>.

protections for library workers, penalties for censoring library materials and remedies for those harmed by censorship. The bill prohibited defunding libraries for refusing to censor books. The bill also limited who could bring a request for reconsideration to either residents of the municipality where a public library was located or students, parents, and teachers of a particular school or district. These limitations were put in place in response to a growing trend of far-right activists traveling to different communities around the state, where they do not live nor have children in the schools, filing attempts to censor library materials often with long lists of books to challenge provided by national far-right groups. The bill also added protections for authors whose works are censored – the first legislation in the nation to do so.

The Freedom to Read Act was introduced in the House as H 5726³³ by Rep. Morales with Rep. Stewart as the primary co-sponsor and in the Senate as S 0238³⁴ by Senator McKenney.

The Freedom to Read coalition went into high gear advocating for these bills. Spearheaded by the authors with support from PRH, an incredible grassroots campaign was launched statewide. There were tabling events, panel discussions at libraries, meetings with legislators, advocacy events at the State House, and most impactful a postcard campaign that yielded over 4,000 handwritten postcards sent by constituents to legislators asking them to support the Freedom to Read Act.

A press conference featuring Rep. Morales and Senator McKenney to officially launch these bills was scheduled at the State House Library during National Library Week. After the press conference was over, volunteers went onto the floor of the House and Senate to present legislators who had publicly gone on the record with their support with book page flowers.³⁵ Many legislators proudly displayed them at their desks during legislative sessions.

The Freedom to Read coalition grew to over 300 active individuals and organizations including librarians, educators, authors, publishers, faith leaders, LGBTQ+ rights groups, civil rights groups, attorneys, labor unions, youth groups, and hundreds of readers from across Rhode Island. More national organizations offered support including the American Library Association, EBSCO, EveryLibrary, and PEN America. Four of the “Big 5” U.S. Publishers: Penguin Random House, Hachette Group, Macmillan Publishers, and Simon & Schuster were joined by Sourcebooks, the American Booksellers Association, the Authors Guild and the National Council of Teachers of English in issuing a letter of support.³⁶

³³ H.B. 5726, 2025 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2025).

³⁴ S.B. 0238, 2025 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2025).

³⁵ How to Make Book Page flowers, Instructables, <https://www.instructables.com/How-to-Make-Book-Page-Flowers/>.

³⁶ *Signed Letter Supporting the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act*, Hachette Book Grp., <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/hachette-book-group-news/signed-letter-supporting-rhode-island-freedom-to-read-act/>.

The hearings in both chambers were packed with public support for the Freedom to Read Act. There was hours of testimony from people telling their stories and how their experiences should not be erased by those seeking to ban books. One special moment saw representatives from the Rhode Island Council of Churches, the Rhode Island Atheists, and the Jewish Alliance testifying together in favor of the legislation.

At the end of the 2024 session, the Senate leadership and the Speaker of the House Joseph Shekarchi (Democrat, District 23, Warwick) gave assurances that the bills would be passed in 2025. Behind the scenes there was concern that the Freedom to Read Act was a completely different piece of legislation than what was introduced the year before. The leadership had concerns over the potential costs of some of the legal penalties and other provisions included in the bill. There were multiple meetings with leadership and their legal counsel to address concerns while still maintaining enough of the original intent to protect those experiencing censorship and have penalties for censoring library materials. Earlier versions of the legislation contained a private right of action with stronger financial penalties for censoring books. During negotiations, some of these provisions were narrowed or removed in order to address concerns raised during the legislative process and ensure the bill could move forward.

While advocates would have preferred stronger penalties, the final legislation maintained important safeguards for library workers, including protections from civil and criminal liability when acting in good faith and remedies for those who experience retaliation. Declaratory and injunctive relief for authors and those with a vested interest in a library against censorship actions were included as well.

A strong statement of policy, with the legislative intent, was also part of the original version of the bill. The text included a finding that the freedom to read is a human right protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Article 1, Section 21 of the Rhode Island Constitution and that it was the duty of government at all levels to protect that right. The finding also included language on the rights of authors, creators, and publishers to communicate their ideas, and affirmed the professional training of librarians. The statement of policy along with the remaining legislative intent in the bill provisions that added affirmative defense protections in the state obscenity statutes were removed in the version that would ultimately be introduced in the Senate as a Sub A. The rationale given for the removal of this language by the Senate legislative staff was that the General Assembly no longer added findings or statements of policy into legislation.

The Senate Education committee recommended a substitute (Sub A)³⁷ of the bill for passage. The full Senate passed the Sub A by a 30-4 vote on May 13, 2025.

After a two-day period, with at least a dozen calls to revise language, we came to agreement with

³⁷ S.B. 0238 Substitute A, 2025 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2025).

Speaker Shekarchi's office on a Sub A for the House to consider. The House State Government and Elections committee recommended the Sub A for passage.³⁸

At a hearing on June 16, 2025, with many Freedom to Read advocates in attendance, the House debated their Sub A. The Republican members tried to pass two amendments to the bill, the first would have stripped the name "Freedom to Read Act" from the legislation, the second would have added parents appointed by local officials to the committees formed to review requests for reconsideration of materials that were proscribed in the legislation. Both amendments failed with all Democrats voting against them. The unamended Sub A passed the House on a 62-11 vote. It is worth noting that Rep. Azzinaro, who had introduced the anti-library bill H 6324 two years earlier, voted in favor of the Freedom to Read Act thanks to the efforts of our Westerly advocates. The House bill was sent to the Senate and was passed in concurrence. At a joyous ceremony on August 12, 2025, held at the Rochambeau Library³⁹ in Providence, Governor Dan McKee signed the Freedom to Read Act into law.⁴⁰

The R.I. Freedom to Read Act has been called the strongest anti-censorship law in the nation. In Rhode Island, many bills are routinely "held for further study" some for over 10+ years. In 2025, payday lending reform finally passed after languishing for 15 years.⁴¹ The three-year journey to pass the Freedom to Read felt like a struggle at times but could be seen as relatively quick passage.

What the Freedom to Read Act Accomplishes

Provides a clear definition of censorship with exceptions for obscene materials tied to the three-prong Miller Test.

Creates model collection development policies for both public and school libraries that are grounded in anti-censorship principles.

Creates a formal book challenge process — Both public and school libraries must have a structured reconsideration procedure. Key protections built into the process:

- Anyone requesting a challenge must review the material as a whole and identify specific objections. Selective passages taken out of context cannot be the basis of a challenge.

³⁸ H.B. 5726 Substitute A, 2025 Gen. Assemb., Jan. Sess. (R.I. 2025).

³⁹ Rochambeau Library is one of the nine branch locations of the Community Libraries of Providence.

⁴⁰ Press Release, Off. of the Governor, *Governor McKee Signs Freedom to Read Act* (June 24, 2025), <https://governor.ri.gov/press-releases/governor-mckee-signs-freedom-read-act>.

⁴¹ Nancy Lavin, Longstanding payday lending reform policy poised for passage in Rhode Island this year, R.I. Current (June 16, 2025), <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2025/06/16/longstanding-payday-lending-reform-policy-poised-for-passage-in-rhode-island-this-year/>.

- A challenged book cannot be removed from the library and must remain available to check out or access while under review.
- A review committee (including one or more librarians) must issue a written decision within 30 days. The same material cannot be challenged again for at least one year.
- Establishes an appeals process.
- Any final decision to restrict or remove a book — especially one that overrules the review committee — must be explained in writing and made publicly available.

Protects library staff — Librarians and library staff acting in good faith are immune from civil and criminal liability. A librarian who is disciplined or fired for refusing to censor materials can sue for reinstatement, back pay, restored benefits, and other relief. Creates an affirmative defense for library workers and educators acting in accordance with library collection policies in chapter 9 title 29 in state obscenity statutes.

Protects funding — A government body cannot cut a public library's funding as retaliation for the library's compliance with the Act.

Grants standing to sue (declaratory and injunctive relief) - Residents with a vested interest in a library, authors whose works have been censored, and librarians who face retaliation can all seek court relief against any government body that violates the Act. Lawsuits must be filed within one year of the violation.

Lessons for Other States

For advocates looking to introduce Freedom to Read legislation in your state, here are some important things to consider and understand.

1. The Freedom to Read is not a library issue, it is a democracy issue. Our success in Rhode Island was achieved because we moved away from a librarian-centric group and built a large coalition representing a wider array of voices. There were times when there were clashes and disagreements among the members of the coalition, but that is to be expected in a large group with varied interests. Coalition work also required a shift for me. As the coalition grew, I had to intentionally step back from holding the reins and create space for others to lead in meaningful ways. That was not always easy, especially when the stakes were high, but it ultimately strengthened the work and built broader ownership across our partners. In hindsight, I see this as an important lesson and best practice: sustainable advocacy depends on shared leadership, even when it requires discomfort and trust in others' expertise.
2. One of our earliest lessons was the importance of securing legislative sponsors in both chambers. Introducing companion bills creates more opportunities for advocacy, stakeholder engagement and legislative momentum. In our first year, we did not have a companion bill, and that decision substantially limited our ability to advocate effectively throughout the session.

3. Be ready for threats and intimidation. The opponents of the Freedom to Read in our state were a small group, but were extremely vocal, uncivil and at times hateful. This was on full display at school committee meetings, town council meetings, and at the State House where librarians were threatened and verbally abused with vile and vitriolic language. At one hearing, Capitol Police escorted librarians to their cars after the hearing due to the threatening language spewed by a person in opposition to the bill. One legislator even commented after the tirade, “This is exactly why we need this legislation.” At another hearing a far-right activist was so disruptive that they were escorted out of the State House by Capitol Police. I personally experienced attacks throughout 2022 and 2023. In the aftermath of the meeting room controversy in Cranston, I received hostile messages via email and social media posts by both far-right activists and those who did not agree with the decision to let the anti-trans meeting move forward. In February 2023, I was asked to speak at the R.I. State House as part of the launch event of “Courageous R.I.”, a media literacy initiative to combat disinformation and propaganda run by the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island’s Harrington School of Communication and Media.⁴² Following R.I. Secretary of State Gregg Amore and several state legislators, I spoke about the importance of the initiative and the rise of censorship and attacks on libraries. This caused another wave of disparaging comments on social media and conservative talk radio. The Chair of our Library Board of Trustees noticed the toll this was taking on me and suggested I start seeing a therapist for my own mental health. I took his advice and for the first time in my life I began therapy. This type of abuse can be stressful and anxiety inducing so you should build a community of care. Don’t be ashamed to seek help if needed. Your mental health and the health of your colleagues is important. If you don’t want to seek out a mental health professional, another option is the Library Support Network⁴³ provided by Urban Librarians Unite. Just remember you are not in this fight alone.
4. Understand your state’s public records laws and establish clear communication practices before engaging in advocacy efforts. During campaigns involving public sector employees and institutions, communications may be subject to public records requests. In recent years, some libraries and library workers have experienced significant increases in records requests related to intellectual freedom issues, requiring substantial staff time and resources to respond. Understanding what communications are considered public records, having and following strong organizational policies, and using appropriate communication channels helps ensure compliance while allowing advocates to participate responsibly and effectively.
5. Regularly monitor the agendas of city and town councils, school committees, board of regents, and county government. Although RILA regularly monitored statewide legislation no such system was in place to monitor activity at the local municipal level. When attempts

⁴² James Bessette, *URI Media Education Lab Launching ‘Courageous RI’ Initiative to Combat Disinformation, Propaganda*, Providence Bus. News (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://pbn.com/uri-media-education-lab-launching-courageous-ri-initiative-to-combat-disinformation-propaganda/>.

⁴³ Support Network, Urban Librarians Unite, <https://urbanlibrariansunite.org/support-network/>.

to pass resolutions in support of anti-library legislation occurred in a few R.I. communities, we did not have a system in place and only found out about these efforts at the last minute and had to rally supporters to the meetings to testify in opposition. It is a real possibility that censorship and other anti-library efforts can bubble up at the municipal level.

6. Once a bill is introduced it is no longer yours. Be prepared for it to go through revisions and amendments along the way that are out of your control.
7. Build relationships with legislators. Make sure you have built relationships with legislators in your community and around the state. During our advocacy campaign, we asked library directors to communicate with their local legislators to gain support. We had built strong relationships with our bill sponsors, and they pushed these bills for years with leadership as priorities. Senator McKenney is a longtime library advocate predating his time in office. He is the former chair of the Library Board of Rhode Island, a former library trustee, and he has participated in ALA's National Library Legislative Day in Washington D.C. on several occasions. I had the honor of serving with him on the Library Board and learning from him during several legislative visits to D.C. Rhode Island libraries had built a strong relationship with him as one of the leading library advocates in the state senate. Representative Morales actually holds office hours in his neighborhood branch library. He is a champion for the power of public libraries in meeting community needs and had worked with RILA on legislation to fully fund state aid to libraries prior to his involvement in the Freedom to Read. Building these relationships are not only important for introducing legislation, but also in being kept in the conversation during the revision and amendment process. Even though there were several revisions to this legislation, we were kept involved and helped craft the revisions to both address the concerns of leadership and keep the principles and protections that were the core of the legislation.
8. Although we ultimately were unable to include the legislative intent in the Freedom to Read Act, other states may have more success in doing so. Wisconsin's statute is instructive: it explicitly states the legislature's intent to regulate commercial obscenity while protecting libraries and educational institutions.⁴⁴ Clear legislative intent language helps ensure that future interpreters understand the statute's purpose and the principles guiding its adoption.
9. The Faith-based community can be a strong ally in defense of the freedom to read. While theological perspectives vary, many faith leaders recognize that religious liberty depends upon the broader principle that individuals must be free to read, explore, and engage with ideas without government censorship. Conversations grounded in religious liberty and the ability of families and individuals to make their own reading choices can resonate with policymakers who may be less familiar or comfortable with the language of intellectual freedom. Faith-based advocates can also be especially effective in circumstances where librarians don't feel comfortable serving as the public face of advocacy efforts.

⁴⁴ Shay Elbaum and Rebecca Mattson, *Safeguarding Libraries: An Analysis of Obscenity and "Harmful to Minors" Laws Exemptions and Defenses* (Unpublished manuscript, 2026).

Conclusion

The Freedom to Read Act did not end censorship in Rhode Island. No law can.⁴⁵ What it did was affirm the principle that no one should have the power to decide what everyone else may read. The work continues. It always will. Every challenged book, every difficult conversation, every coalition built reminds us that democracy is not self-sustaining. It is practiced. Libraries are one of the places where that practice happens every day.

Protecting the freedom to read is not about any single book, it is about preserving the conditions that allow a pluralistic society to function. It is about listening to the community, convening partners, grounding action in research, and insisting that public institutions remain spaces of openness rather than exclusion. It is ensuring that libraries continue to serve as places where voices are not silenced, where inquiry is protected, and where people are trusted to engage with ideas and with one another in good faith.

This is the work libraries have always done. Quietly. Collectively. For the community.

⁴⁵ A few weeks after the Freedom to Read Act was passed by the General Assembly, the book *Grandad's Pride* by Harry Woodgate was defaced at the Cranston Public Library. The incident was reported to the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and the New England Intellectual Freedom Helpline.

Biographical Note: Dan Novack

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

Dan Novack is one of the coolest, most humble, and funniest lawyers I have met. In some ways, that is saying a lot. In some ways, my profession doesn't have a great reputation for humor and humility.

Dan is a famous first amendment and media attorney. He is the Associate General Counsel at Penguin Random House, but he also has a podcast, and is a part time professor, and has been fighting for the release of the FBI's Jeffrey Epstein file since 2017.¹ And somehow he manages to respond to all emails within like ten minutes which seems like a totally different super power we should be celebrating him for. Is he a bot? Is he a man? I don't really know.

Dan brought serious legal expertise, not just the kind you read in a book, but the real world kind of expertise of someone currently and constantly embroiled in book censorship litigation.

Also, Dan is pretty funny and has not yet been indicted under the Espionage Act, according to his LinkedIn page.²

¹ *Ten Questions to a Media Lawyer*, Media L. Res. Ctr., <https://medialaw.org/ten-questions-to-a-media-lawyer-5/> (last visited June 13, 2026).

² Dan Novack, First Amendment and Media Law, LinkedIn, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dan-r-novack> (last visited June 13, 2026).

The Legal Perspective

By Dan Novack

The Freedom to Read is under assault in America. School and local library systems across the country are either removing books from shelves or self-censoring by not purchasing them in the first instance. Librarians are disempowered, harassed, and even threatened.

For the past several decades, intellectual freedom advocates have relied on two longstanding Supreme Court precedents under the First Amendment: *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* (1982) and *Miller v. California* (1973).

Pico stands for the proposition that libraries may not remove or forbid books solely on the basis of disagreement with the author's ideas. *Miller* established the test for evaluating whether a work containing sexual content retains First Amendment protection. It requires holistic review of a book's societal value as opposed to isolated, contextless snippets. Together, these cases safeguard access to literature and to protect librarians from interference.

Penguin Random House is challenging book bans in court throughout the United States. Our publisher-led coalition has blocked multiple states from implementing book ban laws. Yet the future of these legal efforts is unwritten.

Last year, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected *Pico* in the case of *Little v. Llano*, holding that library patrons have no First Amendment right to receive information. Government officials in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi are now free to discriminate against any books – or authors – they disagree with on matters of science, politics, religion, or culture.

Unless and until the Supreme Court weighs in favorably, we cannot assume the future health and vitality of the First Amendment. That is why it is so important to codify the right to read into **state** law. In the wake of the *Dobbs* decision, state legislatures scrambled to enact reproductive freedom legislation to backfill the rights stripped by the Supreme Court. Proactive measures are necessary to avoid fear, confusion, and harm.

That is why a coalition of librarians, authors, publishers, civil liberties groups, and faith leaders came together to support the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act. In addition to codifying the principles of *Pico* and *Miller*, it offers a commonsense standard for “developmentally inappropriate.”

“Developmentally inappropriate” means the material is not structured to account for a child’s age, and is misaligned with the cognitive, emotional or social development of the intended age group as informed by standards and guidance from the American Library Association (ALA) or any other similar well recognized and established educational or developmental authority.

The Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act is also the first law in the United States to explicitly recognize that authors have a right to be read, free from government censorship. These rights can be personally vindicated by students, library patrons, and authors. Rather than tasking a district attorney or state agency with resolving censorship, affected parties can take censors directly to state court and win back the books.

Additionally, the law provides critical protection to librarians, who cannot be disciplined or otherwise retaliated against for their curation decisions. If a school or library board disagrees with a librarian's choice, they can move or remove the book, but not the librarian.

In an era where core Constitutional rights are under attack, Rhode Island has innovated by proactively enshrining core First Amendment protections into state law. It is an inspiration that will undoubtedly be followed by other states looking to protect the free flow of ideas and information.

Biographical Note: Jeanette Bradley & Padma Venkatraman

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

Jeanette Bradley is an extremely talented author and illustrator. She is also a tireless advocate. She was one of the leaders of the Rhode Island chapter of the national coalition Authors Against Book Bans. She can always be found creating. It's amazing to just be near to someone who is always drawing and living her art. Stop what you are doing and go buy her work like *Something Great* and *Love, Mamad* and *No Voice Too Small*, *No World Too Big*, and *No Brain the Same*. Visit her website at jeanettebradley.com.

Padma Venkatraman is an award winning author of *The Bridge Home*, *Born Behind Bars*, *A Time to Dance*, *Island's End*, *Climbing the Stairs* and *Safe Harbor*. She was one of the leaders of the Rhode Island chapter of the national coalition Authors Against Book Bans. Her voice was so important to the work of the coalition because it is so strong and true. Padma is a a gifted teacher and advocate. It is so clear when she speaks out on an issue that she is passionate, informed, and authentic. Visit her at padmavenkatraman.com.

The Author Perspective

By Jeanette Bradley and Padma Venkatraman

Rhode Island Authors Against Book bans held its first meeting in late August of 2024. A dozen authors and illustrators gathered on Padma Venkatraman's back deck to talk about the rising tide of censorship in our country and state. We could see the impact of book banning on ourselves and our fellow creators, as well as librarians, educators, students, booksellers, publishers, and most of all readers.

We knew we needed to take action. Could Rhode Island craft a safe harbor for freedom of expression, in the same way the state had legislated safe harbor for the Affordable Care Act or reproductive freedom?

As a newly-minted, all-volunteer, grassroots organization, we had no budget, no way of accepting donations, and no infrastructure. Neither of us had ever led a grassroots legislative advocacy effort. Few RI-AABB members had ever even written an email to their reps. We were true beginners.

We started from the experience and connections that we had. We knew how to craft compelling narratives, organize panels, and run book events. We had a preexisting casual network of children's book creators, librarians, and educators who had been involved in the We Are ALL Readers diverse children's book festival.

We asked everyone we knew if they could help, or if they knew someone who could help. Several individuals offered us a crash course in the RI legislature and what it takes to get a bill passed. Each connected us to a new person or organization. Our grassroots campaign was successful because of the many people who taught us Advocacy 101, and those who helped us along the way.

Crafting legislative language

The sponsors of the Freedom to Read bill wanted to include all stakeholders in the bill's language but asked us to bring proposed language to them. We knew that no one in our group had the knowledge or skills to write legislation. We were fortunate to connect with the Penguin Random House team, who did. In many early-morning zooms, the Rhode Island coalition hammered out language that met the needs of all stakeholders. It gave standing to library staff, authors and illustrators, publishers, educators, and students and their parents.

We quickly learned that fighting for a bill to be passed requires constant attention. We signed up for alerts to monitor changes. Deletions and modifications to the language of the bill were a frequent occurrence, sometimes at the very last minute. We learned we needed to remain vigilant to ensure that the clauses vital to the people our group represents were retained and not edited or cut before the bill was passed.

All legislation is the product of compromise and revision. Within a coalition, each organization is responsible for advocating for its stakeholders through that process. Legislators want bills that have engagement from stakeholders with different perspectives – a bill is stronger if it has been vetted by producers and consumers in an industry, or organizations that represent competing interests.

Coalition building

To that end, we chose a “big umbrella” approach to Rhode Island Freedom to Read. Freedom of Expression cannot be protected by libraries alone. Educators, students, authors, illustrators, publishers, journalists, booksellers, and most importantly, readers are all directly affected by censorship. The more stakeholders who share the same goal, the more likely a legislative effort is to succeed.

A coalition is the coming together of distinct groups, who may be opposed on some issues, to work for a common purpose. The lack of central command can be messy, but within the tension and chaos lies the power of coalition. Our coalition had a core group of leaders from different organizations who strove equally for our single cause. We fought against hierarchy and distributed leadership responsibilities, by allowing people to take charge of tasks they felt they could excel at.

Rhode Island’s Freedom to Read coalition united publishers, authors, and the RI Library Association – formerly at odds over ebook pricing – on the existential issue of our right to do the work we do, engaging freely in public conversation through the production and exchange of ideas.

A powerful coalition moment in our Senate Committee hearing was when a representative from the Rhode Island Atheists spoke passionately about the need to protect Freedom of Religion and a pastor from the Council of Churches followed immediately with “I agree with everything he just said.”

Framing the issue and imparting urgency

At the beginning of the 2025 legislative session, the RI Freedom to Read bill was in its third year. Both the media and legislators were familiar with it as a library protection bill. As a very blue state, our job was not to convince people to join our side of the censorship issue, it was to convince them to prioritize Freedom of Expression in a sea of competing priorities, during a year with looming budget cuts.

We needed to counter erroneous beliefs about censorship in 2025, from both opponents and allies, including:

- Book bans only happen in red states,
- Censorship wasn’t impacting Rhode Island, and
- Having a book banned means increased sales for authors and illustrators.
- We also needed to clarify and reiterate that censorship harms real people. It is not a victimless

crime that only harms non-human objects like books and libraries. Although it seems obvious that censorship harms readers, the extent of the psychological harm, particularly to young people, is sometimes overlooked. Also frequently overlooked are the many negative effects that impact today's authors who are making a living through their creative work and who suffer emotionally and financially because of censorship.

Every state is different and requires a custom approach rooted in the unique political and social landscape of the state. We found success in reframing the issue and creating a sense of urgency with these talking points:

- We need safe harbor for First Amendment Freedom of Speech and Freedom of the Press rights, in the same way that Rhode Island created a safe harbor for the Affordable Care Act and reproductive freedom.
- Freedom of Speech and the freedom to access information are the foundation of a functioning democracy. Our state was founded on these ideals.
- Authors and illustrators are small business owners in Rhode Island's creative economy, which makes up 3.5% of the state's GDP and draws in even more tourism dollars. Censorship is harming our businesses and livelihoods.
- Public schools are for all. All Rhode Island students deserve to have access to books that reflect their lived experience.

We found our most powerful tool was sharing banned and challenged books by Rhode Island creators with decision-makers, the media, and the public. When we shared these books, we intentionally did not tell people a "reason" for the censorship that had occurred. We chose to not platform the spurious arguments book banners put forward. Instead, we asked people to engage with the books themselves, have conversations about them, and come to their own conclusions.

At our Statehouse book giveaway, a Representative held up Oge Mora's picture book *Saturday*, and asked why it was banned. We responded "Why do you think it was banned?" The Representative flipped through the book, reading the story of a mother and child spending a day together in which mishaps interrupt their routine, but they realize their time together matters more. "It's not..." said the Representative, then paused for a moment gazing at the cover. "It can't just be... Oh, no. It is just because the child in the book is Black, isn't it?"

Over and over again, we fostered moments of understanding with legislators, media, and the general public. Sharing the actual books and talking with or about the real people who made them shifts people's thinking away from the inflammatory and depersonalizing rhetoric of social media and into the rational mind.

Building capacity

We learned that effective advocacy takes many voices, perspectives, and approaches. Hundreds of people helped with the Rhode Island Freedom to Read effort, sharing skills from legal expertise, to artmaking, to organizing.

Many introverts went outside of their comfort zones and wrote a letter to the editor, testified at the statehouse, or called their legislators for the first time as part of this effort. We worked to meet people where they are and support them with concrete, practical advice.

Institutional capacity: The experienced advocates who helped us learn the ropes stressed the importance of a visual identity for our coalition. They told us that we needed to pick a color that no other Rhode Island campaign was currently using, and if possible, get matching t-shirts for visual impact in the crowd at the Statehouse. We were told we also needed buttons and coalition handouts to share with legislators, which meant developing a coalition logo. We were fortunate to get in-kind donations of graphic design and coalition swag, and many people who chipped in, since we did not have an official organization or funding source. Branding, printing, t-shirts, and buttons cost money, and that cost can be a barrier to a coalition's ability to work effectively.

OpEds and Letters to the Editor: We leaned into our skills as writers and held a free writing workshop on how to craft a short but compelling argument for these two very specific writing forms. We actively recruited volunteers to write LTEs with the goal of getting one published in every newspaper in the state. We found letters by locals to the smaller, local papers often had a larger impact than the OpEd in the regional *Boston Globe*.

Communicating with legislators: Rather than having a script, we taught people a three-sentence formula for writing or calling legislators. We asked people to state who they were in relation to the issue (an author, a parent, a library patron, etc), share why they personally cared about Freedom to Read, and then end with a direct ask for support for the bill.

Statehouse events: People who have never been to the Statehouse before need practical advice like where to park, how to enter the building (what side of the building has the real door? What can I take through security? What about accessibility?), and how to find the hearing room. Before every hearing we shared information on how to write an effective three-minute testimony. We showed up to support each other.

Raising public awareness

We held over twenty events per month during the legislative session to educate the public about the bill and to build momentum for it.

We held many author talks and panel discussions around the state. Panels included a librarian, an author, an educator or school board member, and a faith leader or an atheist, to capture different perspectives on Freedom of Expression. At the end of each talk and panel, we saved time for attendees to write postcards to their legislators. We collected, stamped, and immediately mailed the postcards so that people wouldn't bring them home and forget about them. We learned that the easier and more immediate you make it for people to act, the more people will take action.

We staffed postcard-writing tables at community gatherings such as Pride parades, Black History Month events, marches, and neighborhood block parties. We set up Saturday morning tables at local libraries, and hosted meetups and postcard events at libraries, churches, synagogues, book clubs, community events, bars and coffee shops. Each type of event attracted a different audience. At all of them we shared our banned books by Rhode Island creators, passed out one-pagers with bullet points about the Freedom to Read bill, and asked people to write their favorite banned book on a group poster. We had many one-to-one conversations about the issue and the bill.

We helped people who had never written an elected official do so for the first time and helped many Millennial and Gen Z voters who had never written a postcard before, do so for the first time.

We discovered they needed help placing the address and stamp in the right place! We found that postcard writing empowered and energized people, and that they left our events filled with hope. In the smallest state in the country, we helped people write 4,500 postcards to their legislators sharing personal stories about why protecting freedom of speech was important to them.

Books and postcards can continue working even when there aren't volunteers to staff a table. Some libraries, bookstores, and art galleries around the state used our Rhode Island banned and challenged book lists to create displays that patrons could browse or check out. Others offered educational flyers and postcards for interested patrons.

Power of personal story

Legislators are greeted with a firehose of complaints and demands every time they open their email inboxes. Many told us that they get so many form emails that they lose their impact, but that if they get a handful of snail mail letters with personal stories from constituents or a couple of personal phone calls about an issue, they see it as something the people they represent really care about.

The personal is powerful.

The most powerful moments in statehouse testimonies and press conferences were people sharing their stories about the impact of censorship on their lives. In particular, when young people spoke about the harm they experienced when books that mirrored their lives were labeled “inappropriate” or removed from schools, legislators listened. Some legislators spoke about how moved they were and shared stories of books that were important to them as young people.

We know that the thousands of personal stories on postcards also had an impact. At the very end of the session, when the bill was up for its final vote, an opponent took the stand to rail against it. He ended by admitting he knew it would pass and said “At least I won’t have to deal with any more of those Freedom to Read postcards!”

Through our countless conversations with people who are outside of the publishing and library worlds, we learned how little most people know about the rising tide of censorship, and how deeply they care about Freedom of Expression and access to information. Everyone has a story about a book or piece of media that spoke to them and was important to their life. No one wants the government or other people making choices for them about what books or media they can or cannot consume. It is not hard to get people to share these personal stories, it just takes a few moments of connection and conversation, and some gentle empowerment and reassurance that their personal story matters and sharing it will have an impact.

Sustaining the effort

The process of building our coalition and helping the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act become law wasn’t linear. Some of our coalition efforts were wildly successful, others not so much. Key advocates had to drop out for periods of time, and others picked up the slack in their absence. Even after the law passed, the work was not none. The next step was advocacy to ensure that it was fully implemented.

The work to protect Freedom of Expression and access to information is not a sprint, but it is also not a marathon run by one person on a linear path. It is an unending cross-country scramble. But -- it is a relay race. None of us can succeed in this work alone. To sustain this effort over the long term, we must recognize, to paraphrase Lilla Watson, that our liberation is bound up together, and we must work together to achieve our shared goal of Freedom to Read.

Biographical Note: Skip Dye

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

I don't know how you become a lifetime honorary member of the American Library Association, but somehow Skip Dye has figured it out.¹

Skip is the Senior Vice President, Library Sales and Digital Strategy, and Senior Vice President, Sales Operations at Penguin Random House (PRH).

But more than that, Skip is an advocate.

Publishers Weekly bragged about Skip, “no one has been more central to the publishing industry’s efforts to defend the freedom to read than” him.²

Skip swoops into a state, connects people, speaks with tremendous knowledge, buys some stamps for postcard campaigns, and brings so much passion and heart to the coalition,

1 *American Library Association Names Skip Dye Honorary Member*, Am. Libr. Ass’n (Feb. 18, 2025), <https://www.ala.org/news/2025/02/american-library-association-names-skip-dye-honorary-member>.

2 Andrew Albanese, *PW Notables 2024: Skip Dye*, Publishers Wkly. (Dec. 19, 2024), <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/96734-pw-notables-2024-skip-dye.html>.

The Advocacy Perspective

Adaptive Advocacy for Freedom to Read Legislation By Skip Dye

Introduction

Freedom to Read laws are commonly based on the fundamental belief that democracy, education, and free speech depend on access to information, diverse perspectives, and thoughtful collection development by professionals. Relying on belief alone is like planting a seed and expecting it to grow without the right conditions. Just as a garden needs patience, flexibility, and the right support, successful Freedom to Read advocacy requires more than strong beliefs. It needs smart strategy, local awareness, and teamwork to truly thrive.

But if you look at what's actually happening in state legislatures, it's clear that even though the core values and legal principles around intellectual freedom don't change, the ways you have to advocate for those protections can look very different depending on where you are. Freedom to Read advocacy adapts to various state contexts and political climates, guided by consistent ethical principles.

By looking at Rhode Island's 2025 Freedom to Read Act as a central example and comparing it with experiences in Oregon and Colorado, it becomes clear that successful advocacy means accurately reading the political landscape, adjusting coalition members and messaging as needed, and sticking with efforts across legislative cycles without just repeating the same strategies that didn't work before.

Library Advocacy as a Team Sport: Adapting Strategies for Every State

Advocacy is a team sport. We share the same goal - protecting everyone's freedom to read - but the field and the rules differ from state to state. A game plan that succeeds in one place may not work in another, so advocates must adapt to the local landscape and local rules. That may mean changing the tactics, the language, or who takes the lead while remaining true to the same core values. Without flexibility, the message may not connect; without principle, we risk losing sight of what we are fighting for.

The strongest advocates do both: they keep the goal in view, read the field, and adjust as the game unfolds.

Aligning Principle, Process, and Coalition

Rhode Island's Freedom to Read Act, signed into law on July 2, 2025, is a strong example of advocacy tailored to the state's needs. The law treats the freedom to read as an issue of free expression and access to information, then puts those principles into practice through clear policies and protections designed to prevent censorship in public and school libraries. When the bill became

law, supporters emphasized both the values at stake and the practical need for clear procedures, professional standards, and legal protections for library workers acting in good faith. What stands out about Rhode Island is not just what the law says, but how advocates built support for it over time. The coalition reached well beyond the library community, bringing together educators, authors, illustrators, civil liberties advocates, community organizations, religious leaders, and others who could speak credibly about the broader civic consequences of censorship. In a small state, where relationships, trust, and steady engagement carry real weight, that range of voices helped people see the bill as an issue of good governance and basic rights—not simply a concern for library professionals.

Rhode Island advocates knew the work did not end with a floor vote. They tracked committee member dynamics, possible amendments, timing, and what would happen after the bill became law. The Governor’s ceremonial signing, joined by legislative leaders and coalition partners, reinforced the law’s importance and the need for serious follow-through. In short, the coalition did more than advocate: it helped shape the policy, move it through the legislature, and put it into practice.

Persistence and Adaption – not Repetition: Oregon

Oregon’s recent experience demonstrates that to achieve success, one needs both persistence and adaptability. In 2024, advocates for Freedom to Read protections nearly succeeded, but their bill was ultimately blocked due to procedural hurdles and timing at the end of the legislative session. Instead of viewing the outcome as a failure, advocates treated it as an opportunity to assess and address what had gone wrong. They found that, even though many supported the bill’s goals, the coalition wasn’t broad or influential enough to overcome last-minute obstacles and leadership reluctance.

In 2025, advocates advanced SB 1098 as a direct continuation of earlier efforts, this time backed by a broader coalition including education, civil rights, parent, and marginalized community groups. This expanded alliance highlighted widespread support for Freedom to Read protections and shifted political dynamics. The bill passed, showing that adjusting both strategy and coalition membership increases advocacy effectiveness. Oregon’s experience illustrates that learning from setbacks involves reassessing alliances, power structures, and prior obstacles, making analytical persistence critical for eventual success.

Reframing to Literacy and Learning: Colorado

Colorado offers a different, but equally important, example of adaptation. In that state, advocates advanced Freedom to Read legislation by emphasizing schools as learning environments and access to literature as a foundational component of education. Rather than centering public conversation on “book bans” as a cultural conflict, advocates framed the issue in terms of student learning, educational development, economic growth, and the infrastructure necessary to support literacy and critical thinking.

Legislative messages highlighted how libraries and teaching materials help students achieve learning goals and provide them with diverse, suitable resources for their age group. The statute focused on governance and procedures, requiring school districts to establish transparent policies for selecting and reviewing materials. It also made processes more transparent and protected library professionals who followed established guidelines. By focusing on learning over ideology, advocates won support from legislators wary of culture-war battles.

Colorado shows why advocacy must speak to local priorities. By framing the freedom to read as part of strong schools and literacy, advocates built bipartisan support without compromising their values. The lesson is simple: keep the principle, tailor the message.

Read the Room You Are In

Across these examples, a common theme emerges that successful advocacy depends on the ability to “read the room.” This phrase is often used casually. But in the context of state-level legislative advocacy, it refers to a disciplined and ongoing adaptive assessment of how an issue is being perceived. Asking who holds real power over outcomes, and which arguments and messengers are likely to be persuasive in a given moment are key.

Reading the room means knowing whether lawmakers see the bill as good policy or another culture-war fight. Advocates need to spot real process concerns, recognize firm opposition, and anticipate roadblocks like committee chairs, tight legislative calendars, or a veto. Oregon shows what happens when the process is misread; Colorado shows how smart framing can ease resistance.

Common Advocacy Mistakes and How Being Adaptive Avoids Them

One size fits none. Freedom to Read efforts often stumble when advocates copy another state’s playbook without accounting for local politics, governance, and trust. A big coalition is not enough, either. Members need clear roles, different strengths, broad reach, and a shared message.

Advocacy can backfire when national talking points drown out local realities. It also stalls when teams miss deadlines, overlook veto risks, or treat passage as the finish line. Winning the vote is only part of the job: implementation and follow-through matter, too.

Adaptive advocacy means staying flexible: test assumptions, adjust the coalition and message, and plan beyond passage to implementation.

Adaptive Advocacy Is What Endures

Freedom to Read legislation is built on familiar principles: protecting free expression, preventing viewpoint discrimination, and relying on professional standards to guide access to information. But just agreeing on these ideals does not guarantee they will become law. Turning ethical consensus into actual legislation depends on each state's unique politics, institutions, and power dynamics, which means advocates need to be flexible and strategic. They need to be adaptive. For example, Rhode Island's 2025 law succeeded because the coalition, legislative process, and messaging all fit the state's climate. Oregon's experience shows that setbacks can lead to future wins if advocates learn, build broader coalitions, and tackle procedural hurdles. Meanwhile, Colorado found success by focusing on educational outcomes and reframing the conversation so it resonated with local priorities. Across these states, adaptability, reading the room, not rigid campaigns, is what gets results.

Lasting protection for the freedom to read isn't about copying a blueprint from one state to another. It is about building advocacy strategies that grow and adapt as political landscapes shift. When advocates stay flexible, grounded in their principles, and responsive to the realities around them, they can turn the idea of intellectual freedom into a living, enforceable promise. These stories from Rhode Island, Oregon, and Colorado show that successful advocacy is more than just legal or political maneuvering; it's a blend of ethical conviction, practical know-how, and the ability to form strong, collaborative partnerships. By reading the room and working together, advocates can turn setbacks into opportunities and ensure freedom to read protections don't just survive but thrive for the long run.

Biographical Note: Rosie Stewart

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

Former manager of grassroots communications for the American Library Association's Public Policy and Advocacy Office,¹ Rosie is the current senior public policy manager at Penguin Random House.²

Rosie was once described to me as the “fairy godmother of Freedom to Read.” And she is, complete with magic wand.

While I could write a formidable essay on what Rosie brings to coalition work, I want to point out that in this white paper, Rosie is representing a variety and diversity of perspectives that belong in this work.

The coalition was consistent about a message. The Freedom to Read is not just a library issue. It is an everyone issue. It is in this spirit that Rosie's essay discusses some of our most critical partners, authors.

Authors write the stories. They draw the characters. And they are being faced with hard and soft censorship which erases not only their voices, but their paychecks.

Rosie is doing the work she always does, which is putting others before herself and sharing about the importance of coalition diversity and coalition inclusion.

¹ Andrew Albanese, *Penguin Random House Creates Key New Role to Help Battle Book Bans*, *Publishers Weekly* (Sept. 26, 2024), <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industrynews/libraries/article/95984-penguin-random-house-creates-key-new-role-to-help-battle-book-bans.html>.

² Laura Miller, *Rosalie Stewart Is the Anti-Book-Banning Public Policy Manager at Penguin Random House. Here's What That Means.*, *Slate* (Oct. 3, 2024), <https://slate.com/culture/2024/10/book-banning-publishers-fight-back-rosalie-stewart.html>.

The Holistic Perspective

Engaging Our Allies By Rosie Stewart

The fight for the freedom to read continues to escalate, and many sectors are now embracing cooperation – across business, academia, libraries, civil society organizations, and others – to protect this fundamental right. Within the policy arena, from federal to state legislatures to local school districts, the key to success is amassing a coalition wide enough to pressure policymakers to make change. Even so, the freedom to read brings some allies together who are not used to working together, and with that comes challenges.

One challenge that library associations face in policy advocacy is that their members are public sector employees who are limited in their ability to engage in advocacy. As some states pass laws or regulations hostile to professional associations such as the American Library Association, librarians working in public universities, libraries, and schools face higher levels of scrutiny and in some cases professional consequences to speaking out even in a private capacity. And because librarians have a lower rate of unionization than, for instance, public school teachers, they lack the kind of auxiliary political organizations provided by union dues-funded groups like the National Education Association or the American Federation for Teachers.

This is where other coalition members who are not public employees, especially authors, can step in. Authors are often outspoken and respected members of their communities and have led coalitions for the freedom to read in states such as Rhode Island and New Mexico. Authors Against Book Bans has many regional affiliates that are key members of coalitions nationally and in state-based coalitions around the country. And authors provide an important voice because their livelihoods are directly threatened by book banning, which brings policymakers face-to-face with the human impacts of censorship.

In a similar way, the voice of parents can turn the opposition's argument on its head. While the opposition argues for a parent's "right" to determine what books are available to the community in a library, there are parents concerned about their child's right to have materials relevant to their education. There are parents concerned that school boards are removing materials that reflect their child's experiences in ways that can be enlightening and enriching. When we focus on the rights of all parents, we dispel the myth of parents' rights as a talking point for the censors.

Besides shaping the public narrative, coalition management is also key to success in moving through the legislative process. Freedom to read legislation touches on a wide variety of stakeholders with different levels of experience with and influence on the legislative process – from entrenched interests like teacher's unions and schoolboard associations to brand new organizations like Authors Against Book Bans. There have been many cases where legislation is derailed because of 11th-hour opposition from key groups who had not been previously consulted. And when politicians hear dissenting views

from groups they think “should” work together, such as librarians and teachers, they’d rather not pass anything than risk alienating a constituency. That’s why it’s so important that coalitions cast a wide net and stay in regular contact, to avoid jeopardizing their priorities by avoidable miscommunication or non-communication.

There are many other barriers to cooperation within coalitions advocating together, from an over-reliance on volunteers and lack of compensation to genuine disagreements on policy merits. But where we can create agreement, it is important to do so through transparency and having different coalition members play different roles. To mount a proper defense of the freedom to read, many different organizations will have to trust one another. And trust is only built through continued conversation, solidarity, and cooperation. Thankfully, those conversations are happening all around the country among people who share a common goal: to give everyone access to the transformative power of reading.

Biographical Note: Margaret Paccione

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski is a licensed psychologist, teacher, and rehabilitation specialist.

Dr. Paccione is the director of clinical innovation for Bradley Hospital, the nation's first psychiatric hospital for children. She is also an assistant professor (clinical) of the department of psychiatry and human behavior at The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

While many on the coalition were experts in librarianship, law, and social justice, Dr. Paccione filled the role as expert on the mental and emotional health needs of children.

Having experts across sectors provided strength, legitimacy, and depth to the coalition. Dr. Paccione is one example of such an expert.

The Psychologist Perspective

Reading and Social Emotional Development

By Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski

My perspective leans heavily on the familiar saying, “A story is worth a thousand words.”

Years ago I was working on my doctoral dissertation, and I had developed a routine of bringing my daughter, who was in middle school to work with me in the library. In those days journals were still available on shelves and she was great at locating the articles I needed. In fact, she had become quite skillful at this task. One day we were working in the Fordham University library in New York and my daughter brought me a book that she had pulled off a shelf in the sociology section.

“Mom, look at this! What is this?”

My daughter was pointing to a picture of a lynching that had taken place in Georgia in the early 1900s. As a parent, this is not the first book I would have selected for 12-year-old year old reading, but there it was and it promoted a productive, age-appropriate teaching experience. This memory sticks with me because it was an exquisite example of social and emotional learning within the context of a library book.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. The importance of this type of learning is what encouraged me to join the Freedom to Read Coalition, volunteer at events, testify at a hearing, and participate in the ongoing legislative advocacy efforts.

As this collection of writings is meant not just to document our process, but to provide motivation and a playbook for those arounds the country, I encourage readers to engage local educators and administrators, behavioral health clinicians (mental health counselors, social workers, psychiatric nurses, pediatricians, psychologists and psychiatrists), and local chapters of national professional associations (American Counseling Association, National Association of Social Workers, American Psychiatric Nurses Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry). The National Alliance on Mental Illness is the largest grassroots mental health organization and its local and state chapters are active in policy creation and legislative advocacy.

Although the development and prominence of SEL has been shaped by two foundational perspectives, namely, emotional intelligence theory¹ and the currently popular CASEL competency-based framework,² both emphasize the critical importance of SEL in human development and

¹ See generally Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam Books 1995).

² Goleman, *supra* note 1.

academic success. The emotional intelligence theory delineates four domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management which taken as a whole influence an individual's ability to manage emotions, maintain social relationships and make sound decisions.³

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions.”⁴ Over the past decade the role of SEL in the advancement of educational equity and excellence has also come further into focus.

A consensus of educators and behavioral health professionals, point to five core competencies of social and emotional learning. They are self-management, relationship building, responsible decision making, social awareness, and self-awareness.

Constructive conversation about complicated topics is the foundation of healthy social and emotional learning and books are the cornerstone of this foundation. Books are a steady supply of complex and often thorny subjects that help us develop empathy, increase understanding of social issues and enhance sound decision making. Research has shown that that reading can help label complex emotions and promote empathy and emotion regulation in children.⁵⁵

Furthermore, according to surveys, children who participate in discussion about inclusive topics report feeling safer, missed fewer school days and have higher grades.

The Freedom to Read movement to allow access to a variety of books on a variety of topics supports a safe and productive environment in which librarians, authors, illustrators, and publishers can continue to make books of age-appropriate content available to our youth. This is not only important from the perspective of those professionals, but it is important to the social and emotional development of our youth.

To return to the story, my daughter is now a lawyer, law professor, and active in social justice issues. She is also the editor of this volume and was one of the leaders of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read coalition.

³ Goleman, supra note 1.

⁴ CASEL, supra note 2.

⁵ S.C. Schwering, N.M. GhaFari-Nikou, F. Zhao, P.M. Niedenthal & M.C. MacDonald, *Exploring the Relationship Between Fiction Reading and Emotion Recognition*, 2 Afect. Sci. 178 (2021).

Biographical Note: Eugene T. Dyszlewski

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Editor

The Rev. Eugene T. Dyszlewski is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. He is Pastor Emeritus of Lime Rock Baptist Church in Lincoln, RI. He is a Community Minister at First Unitarian Church Providence. He is the Chair of the Religious Coalition for a Violence-Free Rhode Island. He is the chair of the advocacy committee of the Rhode Island Council of Churches. He also previously served as chair for the Religious Coalition for Marriage Equality.

He is also the best dad ever.

His role in the Coalition was largely elder statesperson. He has been advocating in Rhode Island on social justice issues for decades and was able to provide a pragmatic perspective on some of the political and communication decisions we needed to make in real time. Also, because he has seen legislation die far more times than pass, he was also able to provide a strong sense of where we were getting things right (and wrong), which was missing for so many of us who were new to advocacy or new to advocacy in Rhode Island.

The Religious Perspective

Freedom to Read and Religion
By Eugene T. Dyszlewski

The Freedom to Read Act matters to the religious community because faith by its very nature cannot be coerced. Religion asks for personal assent and commitment. Authentic belief requires choice. Choice requires options. Reading exposes us to stories and perspectives about our own traditions and well as others, a process that helps shape our moral imagination. Most religious traditions hold conscience to be inviolable — a place of interior moral awareness wherein we encounter truth, the sacred. Conscience is enriched by ideas.

Genuine freedom implies ability to articulate beliefs, to teach and transmit traditions, to identify ethical principles and to engage in creative dialogue. Freedom to read protects inquiry and meaning-making. It allows people to be free to seek truth and to let that search shape who they become. It allows people to reflect, question, and integrate novel, as well as established ideas, which is key to moral formation.

Conscience can't flourish where access is limited or controlled.

Historically, conversations in all religious communities have included disagreements. Our lives are not static. Religious and moral discernment needs to be equally dynamic. Religious discernment flourishes by engaging with texts and voices beyond one's immediate circle. Religious communities are best served when adherents are able to clarify beliefs, test ideas, adjust to new situations in the context of their lives.

Religion, as a human enterprise, is best served when there are social safeguards present. Religion can be, and has been, used to dominate rather than liberate. Religious groups reflect the diversity of American society and in most places membership is unequal. It is important for majority religious communities to recognize and respect smaller groups. Diversity challenges us to be in constant dialogue with our values. Much like freedom, in a diverse society tolerance is both a religious and a civic virtue. It requires empathy not agreement. An appreciation for diversity diminishes the temptation to exert power. The Freedom to Read Act discourages that impulse.

Religion helps people find meaning in life not by shielding them from complexity or discomfort, but by offering them ways to live meaningfully within it. It weaves together story, value, suffering, community, and transcendence into a framework that can hold both joy and loss. Some religious practices are designed to help with emotional regulation, moral repair after failure, and a willingness to live oriented toward truth, justice, love.

The viewpoint of religion is: Your life matters. Your choices matter. Your suffering is seen. You belong. And you are not alone in the search for meaning. Religion is a supportive framework that encourages a sense of meaning and purpose - a life oriented toward value rather than survival. However, a religious life is not simply an entirely private personal experience disconnected from the world. It is a way of being in the world. Expressing religious sentiments publicly is protected by the Freedom to Read Act.

Religions tend to be social in nature, with adherents gathering in congregations, parishes, sangha and other associations. This comes as no surprise because humans are fundamentally relational beings. This is evident in the inherently social nature of Christianity. Jesus' invitation to the disciples, was to participate in the "Kingdom of God." While he addressed and worked with individuals, his real interest was not individualistic but social. Jesus wanted to encourage individuals to flourish, because it is through flourishing human beings that the Kingdom, or the "Divine Milieu" is built.

Morality is understood in a communitarian framework. Virtuous behavior results in community-building. Love is the core feature of the Kingdom. Love is society-making. In contrast, anti-social behavior is immoral. For example, if someone uses up the wealth of the community to please themselves, at the very least, decreases social amity and likely causes additional harm.

Coercion is a particularly pernicious dynamic. It undermines the agency of another human being. Choice is a key feature of human nature, as well as a necessary element in the chemistry of any human relationship. Informed choice is the predicate for authentic self-expression and for genuine commitment. Impeding the free exchange of ideas undermines this process. For community building, coercion is an ineffective and misguided substitute for the impact of mutual human affection. A flourishing human community, secular or religious, demands authenticity. It's not simply about membership. It is about belonging.

Conclusion

By Nicole P. Dyszlewski, editor

This white paper is rife with advice. There are many lessons to be learned and wisdom extrapolated from the Rhode Island experience. The below advice is specifically tailored for readers looking for more universal advice that might work in their home state.

Freedom To Read (FTR) is not just a library worker issue.

Framing FTR as a library worker issue only tells some of the story. Furthermore, it is a story which only resonates with some constituents and some representatives. However, framing FTR as an issue that does resonate in your state can make a real difference. FTR is an education issue. FTR is a democracy issue. FTR is an intellectual freedom issue. FTR is a parenting issue. You know what works for your community. Find it and go forward with a framing that is truthful, authentic, and consistent.

The diversity of the coalition is its greatest strength.

If you are building or growing a statewide or municipality-wide coalition, seek diversity. You don't need a coalition of people who all agree. You need a coalition of people who can appeal to a broad constituency, who can challenge each other, who can spot issues, who can solve problems, who can communicate in a variety of ways, and who have different skill sets. Your coalition will be stronger with diversity.

Diversity is not one dimensional.

You might think by reading this paper that Rhode Island is a uniquely diverse place. It is not. In fact, Rhode Island remains disproportionately non-Hispanic white and has smaller Black and Asian American populations than the United States overall. Rhode Island also lacks religious diversity. In fact, some have estimated that Rhode Island has the highest percentage of Catholic adults of any U.S. state. Finally, over 90 percent of Rhode Islanders live in areas classified as urban. While we should not be mistaken as uniform, we should also not be mistaken as leading in diversity. Our coalition was diverse in some ways, and lacked diversity in others. Build a coalition which represents diversity in a myriad of ways.

Our coalition's diversity could have been better. We encourage your coalition to treat our experience as an opportunity to grow and improve on this facet.

You might think by reading this paper that our coalition was perfectly comprised or perfectly balanced. It was not. To be clear, in some ways we were diverse and in some ways we were not. You can do better than we did.

You will have good days and you will have not good days. Keep going.

If you are doing it right, advocacy is not always that fun. You have good days where you send out hundreds of postcards and feel like you are making a difference. You have bad days where you are accused of promoting pedophilia on the House floor. Advocacy is hard. Keep going.

Don't exclude the voices of children and young adults.

Children and young adults participating in advocacy activities can be the most powerful and effective voices for FTR. Engage them. Whether it is outreaching parents or church groups or student activity groups, engage young adults in these conversations. They are future voters and this work impacts them in school and at home. They can draw postcards. They can send emails. They can speak at hearings. Find ways to include their perspectives and experiences whenever possible.

This is a movement not an afternoon.

Legislation takes years. If at first you don't succeed, come back next session with another bill. You will likely not pass a bill the first time it is introduced in your state. That's ok. This work is less about convincing legislators to pass your bill and more about making it inevitable to all that your bill will pass. This takes creativity and resolve and time.

Visual imagery is important.

The Authors Against Book Bans Rhode Island Chapter and The Womxn Project were both vital partners in the coalition because they consistently presented information in a visual way. Our postcards were remarkable. Our logo was recognizable. Our art advocacy was impactful. Don't forget that some people are most impacted by infographics, activism, and social media. Provide content in a variety of formats to engage a variety of audiences.

Proximity and community matter.

The road to victory in the statehouse is really paved by being present in local and community spaces. Your elected officials represent a community. Meet them where they are at in their own community. We held events all over the state and solicited postcards and phone calls and emails and testimony from all over the state because we knew to be successful in the state we needed to be successful in all of the cities and towns in the state. Visit different libraries. Engage library trustees. Engage school boards. Speak at local churches. Your best bet is to have a movement that is not based in the statehouse, but one that is based in the community.

People were consistently surprised by what has been banned. Use that surprise to educate and advocate.

I brought banned or challenged children's books with me everywhere I went simply because people were consistently surprised (aghast even) at the content of the books that have been challenged. This surprise allowed me to engage people and provided an easy way to start a

conversation about filling out a postcard or making a phone call. You can find lists of books which have been challenged in your state. Select a book and allow people to thumb through it. You may be surprised by how effective this is at getting a conversation started.

People may be disconnected but they aren't so removed that they can't be engaged.

Not everyone is aware of book banning statistics. Not everyone knows the name of their state senator. Not everyone even knows how to locate that information online. That's ok! Just because someone isn't spending their weeknights watching Capitol TV doesn't mean they can't be engaged. You may be surprised by how willing people are to engage in advocacy if you make doing so understandable, digestible, and bite-sized.

You don't have to be a professional advocate to run or join a coalition.

There are people who are full time lobbyists and/or community organizers. I am not one of those people. I was pretty new to advocacy when I began my FTR activism. At best, I am an accidental advocate. I promise you that you do not have to be a professional to be a successful advocate. It can be scary. It can be intimidating. It can really push you out of your comfort zone. But it is doable even if it is something you have never done or never even wanted to do. The work makes the newness and discomfort worth it.

The journey of a thousand steps starts with one.

Just start doing something in the direction of Freedom to Read in your state or town. Maybe the most you can do is to start a book club of banned books. Maybe you start to create bookmarks with book banning facts with your kids to put in every little free library you see. Maybe you call a local chapter of a library organization. Our coalition grew when a few people took a few small steps. Anyone can start this journey. Just take a step.

Nicole Dyszlewski, Freedom to Read Coalition Testimony in Favor of SB 0238

My name is Nicole P. Dyszlewski and I am a librarian, lawyer, and law professor.

I write today as one of the leaders of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Coalition, an all grassroots effort to support SB 0238, oppose censorship of library materials, and support protections for librarians.

Our coalition consists of a diversity of librarians, authors, publishers, booksellers, moms, readers, voters, rabbis, ministers, and several organizations such as:

Rhode Island Library Association

Rhode Island Council of Churches

NEARI

RIFTHP

Authors Against Book Bans

ARISE

Common Cause Rhode Island

The Womxn Project

Rhode Island League of Women Voters

RI ACLU

Pride in Aging

RI Atheists

East Bay Citizens for Peace

TeachTruthRI Coalition

Rhode Island Center for the Book

New England Independent Booksellers Association

American Booksellers Association

American Booksellers for Free Expression

Rhode Island Jewish Alliance

Latino Policy Institute

School Librarians of Rhode Island

We have been holding events, large and small, throughout our state in support of this bill. Hopefully you have seen our postcard, heard our voices, and witnessed our advocacy.

On behalf of the coalition I write to share our support for SB0238:

- **We believe in the 1st amendment.**
- **We believe that librarians are valuable and their professional collection development decisions should be protected.**
- **We believe the individual voices of authors and illustrators of all races, genders, gender identities, ethnicities, religions, and beliefs are important.**
- **We see value in access to a diversity of library materials.**

Hello! My name is Nicole Dyszlewski and I am one of the leaders of the grassroots Rhode Island Freedom to Read Coalition. I am also a lawyer, a librarian, a law professor and assistant dean at Roger Williams University School of Law, and a co-host of the fledgling podcast Law 401: Legal Issues Decoded. All that by way of saying I am a huge law and library nerd who is having the best day of her life in the presence of the Governor and his staff, Speaker of the House Shekarchi, Sen. McKenney, Rep. Morales, legislators who sponsored earlier versions of this bill, other elected officials in attendance, legislative staff, members of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Coalition, and we are doing this all at a local library which is the lifeblood of the community. Thank you for all being here, thank you all for the work you have done to get us this groundbreaking bill passed, and thank you for recognizing the importance of libraries big and small. Libraries are the heart of the community and I am so proud that we have these leaders moving this community in this direction in this moment.

As one of the leaders of the Freedom to Read Coalition, I can say with certainty that this new Rhode Island Freedom to Read law is an important moral statement. The passage of the bill and signing of this law sends the message that all stories have value; the voices and stories of all children, all library patrons, all immigrants, all moms, all LGBTQIA young adults, all members of faith communities, all victims of sexual abuse, all members of communities of color, all artists, all people struggling with drug addiction or thoughts of self harm, and all writers, illustrators, historians, researchers, creators and scholars have value.

This law affirms that you don't have to agree with someone to recognize the value in their story and their voice and their humanity. The Rhode Island Freedom to Read Coalition believes that this is the lesson we all need to hear right now in libraries, in schools, at publishing houses, in homes, and in the state house. And today Rhode Island is sending that message loud and clear.

We have tirelessly advocated, educated the public, designed, created and wrote postcards about the passage of this law to protect and affirm the free speech rights of authors and to uplift an individual's right to make their own decisions in what they read. We have rallied to support librarians as professionals with ethics and standards. We have innovated in this work by codifying a private right of action to allow efficient redress when these important rights are not respected.

That is to say this law is not performative and it is not just for show. Rhode Island means business.

This law, sponsored by these legislators, and signed by this Governor, is now a model for legislators and advocates in other states who understand that access to the writings of any one of us is an expression of justice for all of us.



H5726: "Freedom to Read Act" Issue Brief

Rhode Island Library Association – in support

The freedom to read is a human right, constitutionally protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, and Article 1, Section 21 of the Rhode Island Constitution. Individuals have the right to **free speech, free inquiry** and the **right to form and express their own opinions**.

It is the responsibility of the government at all levels to protect the freedom to read.

- The freedom to read does not require a person to agree with topics or themes within a material, but instead allows an individual to explore and engage with differing perspectives to form and inform their own views;
- Authors, creators, and publishers have a right to communicate their ideas to anyone who is interested in receiving them. Students and library patrons of all ages have a corresponding right to encounter them without government interference;
- Parents have the right to guide their own children's reading and viewing choices in libraries, but not dictate what other people's children are allowed to read.
- A librarian is professionally trained to curate and develop age relevant collections sufficient in size and varied in subject matter to benefit their community.
- School and Public Libraries must have a **collection development policy** and a **reconsideration policy** adopted by their respective governing bodies. Required elements are detailed in the bill.

Why is the Freedom to Read Act important now?

The American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom documented **1,247 demands to censor library books, materials, and resources in 2023**. 4,240 unique titles were challenged in 2023 compared to 223 in 2020!

Four key trends emerged from the data gathered from 2023 censorship reports:

- Pressure groups in 2023 focused on public libraries in addition to targeting school libraries. The number of titles targeted for **censorship at public libraries increased by 92 percent** over the previous year; **school libraries saw an 11 percent increase**.
- Groups and individuals demanding the censorship of multiple titles, often dozens or hundreds at a time, drove this surge.
- Titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47 percent of those targeted in censorship attempts.

Rhode Island has seen an increase in attempts to ban books from school libraries, with parents and organized groups targeting 28 titles ([*RI 'Freedom to Read' bill would protect librarians from censorship prosecution. What to know.*](#) By Katherine Gregg. Providence Journal, 3/6/2025.)

Key points:

- This legislation does not limit a parents' right to guide *their own children's reading selections* in school or public libraries in any way.
- Librarians utilize professional journals and reviews, award lists, school curriculum, subject matter experts, and community interests to guide their selections of library materials.

Key differences between legislation introduced in 2024 vs. 2025

Freedom to Read:

- The new bill addresses Freedom to Read **in public libraries and school libraries**; the 2024 version only addressed public libraries.
- The new bill specifically states that **authors, creators, and publishers have a right to communicate their ideas to anyone who is interested in receiving them** and that books should not be removed because of the origin, background, or views of the library material or **of those contributing to its creation**.
- The new Freedom to Read bill **requires school & public libraries to adopt collection development & reconsideration policies, which are tied back to their governing body**; School Committee in the case of schools and the Board of Trustees in the case of public libraries. Those governing authorities delegate the work of managing collections to master degreed-trained librarians through these policies.
- The new bill **limits the ability to request reconsideration of library materials to people with a "vested interest."**
 - "Individual with a vested interest in the public library" means any resident who is served by the public library and resides in the municipality where the library is situated.
 - "Individual with a vested interest in the school library" means any teaching staff member employed by the school district, any parent or guardian of a student enrolled in the school district at the time the removal form is filed, and any student enrolled in the district at the time the removal form is filed.
- Addition of **private right of action provision**: An Anti-Censorship claim is established under this section when a government body censors or orders others to censor library materials outside of the normal reconsideration process; or imposes discipline, threatens to impose discipline, or terminates a school or library employee for refusing to censor library materials. Librarians, students, authors, publishers, and booksellers have a right, in these cases, to have their attorney fees covered without utilizing library funds already granted to the library for operations or other purposes.

Legal protections in state obscenity statutes:

- An affirmative defense is included in RI obscenity statutes for a library, school, or museum and their employees if a charge is brought under this statute. This aligns with decades old protections in all other New England states and 40+ states across the country. This is necessary because there is a movement to accuse librarians and educators of peddling pornography in our libraries. This false narrative is using the term pornography to define any material by LGBTQIA+ voices.



April 3rd, 2025
In Favor of HB5726

My name is Aaliyah (preferred name Alex) Rivera and I am a Youth Leader at ARISE. I am writing to support HB5726 because about 2 months ago, I finished a book— and this book was about a teenaged boy, entering his freshman year of high school, and he is grappling with the effects of losing his best friend to suicide, and his aunt in car crash. He makes friends with two graduating seniors, and throughout the novel, he learns to evaluate his past and how it has affected him, and his relationships with his newfound friends as the school year comes to a close, and he will no longer have his friends with him.

Even before January of this year, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky has been banned in 5 states, and my fear is that it will continue to be banned all throughout the country; and I won't be able to share this novel with my peers.

The sharing of literature and education has always been a very important aspect in my life, and reading has been right there along with it. Even before elementary school, reading has been important to me and my development. Having access to a public library really allowed me to explore my creativity, letting me engage in the vast selection of books, and literature. That freedom helped me form my own perspective on the way words can, and have, changed my view and outlook on how human beings connect and share stories with each other— and have done so for millennia.

I ask that you continue to support HB5726, and continue to encourage and influence legislation to protect our access to authentic, and uncensored literature amongst all Americans, no matter their identity markers.

Alex Rivera
11th grade - Junior
Classical High School



State of Rhode Island

Department of State | Office of the Secretary of State

Gregg M. Amore, *Secretary of State*

April 3, 2025

The Honorable Evan P. Shanley, Chair
House Committee on State Government and Elections

RE: In support of H5726 - An Act Relating to Libraries – The Freedom to Read Act

Dear Chair Shanley,

I write this letter in support of House Bill 5726, legislation that encourages free expression and access to information by prohibiting the censorship of library materials.

As a former history and civics teacher for over 30 years, I know how crucial it is to educate our students – and Rhode Islanders of all ages – on both our history and how to participate in our democracy. Free access to knowledge and the ability to freely express one's individuality are core principles of a democracy and are fundamental in keeping an informed and engaged citizenry.

As the Department that oversees the State Library, reminiscing on the foundation of this institution and its purposeful design within the State House is a clear indicator that our predecessors considered the value of public access to information and historical records for all Rhode Islanders.

At a time when our governing institutions and media outlets are being heavily scrutinized by misinformation and inflammatory discourse, it is critical that libraries remain the center for the public to access different perspectives and beliefs. However, across the country and within our state, books are being challenged and banned from our public libraries. The practice of censoring books solely because of the bias of the few should not impede the freedoms of the many.

Attached is research compiled by Kate Wells, the State Librarian, related to books that have been banned and/or challenged across the state.

That said, I urge the support of this Committee for House Bill 5726, as Rhode Islanders' rights and freedoms are essential to the functioning of our democracy.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Gregg M. Amore
Secretary of State

cc: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on State Government & Elections
The Honorable David Morales

State House, Room 218, Providence, RI 02903

Phone: 401-222-2357 | Fax: 401-222-1356 | secretaryamore@sos.ri.gov | www.sos.ri.gov



State of Rhode Island

Department of State | Office of the Secretary of State

Gregg M. Amore, *Secretary of State*

To: The Honorable Evan P. Shanley, Chair
House Committee on State Government & Elections

Cc: The Honorable David Morales & the Honorable Members of the House
Committee on State Government & Elections

From: Kate Wells, State Librarian

Date: April 3, 2025

Subject: Regarding House Bill 5726 (Morales) – An Act Relating to Libraries – The Freedom to Read Act

MEMORANDUM

Chair Shanley,

I write this memorandum regarding House Bill 5726 legislation that encourages free expression and access to information by prohibiting the censorship of library materials.

Below is the information I compiled related to books that have been banned and/or challenged. A “challenge” is an attempt to remove or restrict access to materials based upon the objections of a person or group. A book is “banned” when it is entirely removed from a collection in response to a formal or informal challenge.

In total, there are 44 identified titles that have been challenged since 2015. Several titles have been challenged more than once. One title has been “banned” (i.e. fully removed from a library). One title has been removed from school curriculum but kept in the library.

There is no singular organization or entity that collects this data. This list combines several sources and represents only cases that have been reported. It is believed that book challenges may not be reported to professional organizations and/or the media. Methodologies for collecting data, identification of affected libraries, and reporting on the final response of the affected library differ according to the reporting source.

The American Library Association does not identify the final status of individual titles, but they do track cumulative data. They note that in 2024, there were three attempts to censor books in Rhode Island libraries. Each attempt targeted a single title. Two of those attempts were at school libraries and one was at a public library. Access to two of the titles was retained; access to the other was restricted (i.e. “banned”).

Between 2014-2024, ALA has documented challenges against 38 titles. Twenty-nine of those attempts were in school libraries, eight of those attempts were at public libraries, and one was in a school curriculum. While information is incomplete regarding the final resolution, ALA data notes that access to twenty-nine titles was retained, one title was restricted (i.e. “banned”) and two books were withdrawn from collections based on the ideas and viewpoints expressed in them.

The following list of titles is compiled from various sources including:

- American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom (ALA)
- Rhode Island Library Association (RILA)
- Authors Against Book Bans (AABB)
- Various news & media outlets (News)

Book Challenges in Rhode Island, 2014-2024**Compiled by Kate Wells, State Librarian**

Year of Challenge	Title	Library	Status	Source
2024	A History of Nursery Rhymes by Percy B. Green	Anonymous Public Library	Retained	ALA; AABB; RILA; News
2024	A Costume for Charly by C.K. Malone	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	A Place Inside of Me by Zetta Elliott	Smithfield School District	Retained	ALA; AABB; News
2023/24	All-American Boys by Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely	Anonymous School Library	Unknown	AABB; RILA; News
2022	Beloved by Toni Morrison	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; News
2023	Blankets by Craig Thompson	Anonymous School Library	Retained	ALA; AABB; RILA; News
2023	Bloody Mary: Ghost of a Queen? By Aubre Andrus	Anonymous School Library	Retained	ALA; AABB; RILA; News
2023/24	Bob by Wendy Mass & Rebecca Stead	Anonymous School Library	Retained	AABB; RILA; News
2015	By Any Means Necessary by Malcom X	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	By the Time You Read This, I'll be Dead by Julie Anne Peters	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2023/24	Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice by Phillip Hoose	Anonymous School Library	Retained	AABB; RILA; Newspaper
2022	Drama by Raina Telgemeier	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2022	Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2022	Feed Your Mind: A Story of August Wilson by Jen Bryant	Smithfield School District	Retained	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2018	Fire Song by Adam Garnet Jones	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Fly on the Wall by Remy Lai	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2021	Fun Home by Alison Bechdel	Jacqueline M. Walsh School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Pawtucket	Banned	AABB; Newspaper
2023	Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA

2022	Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2021	Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe	Westerly School Library	Retained	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2021	Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe	North Kingston School Library	Retained	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2018	Happy Families by Allen Ahlberg	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2021	Iced (Book 6 of the Fever series) by Karen Marie Moning	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Identity & Gender by Charlie Ogden	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	LGBTQ Rights [author unidentified]	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	More Happy Than Not by Adam Silvera	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2023	My Body is Growing by Dagmar Geisler	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	AABB; Newspaper
2024	Rebound by Kwame Alexander	Gloucester School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; RILA; Newspaper
2019	Shoot Your Shot by Vernon Brundage Jr.	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Sloppy Firsts by Megan McCafferty	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AABB; Newspaper
2023/24	Stamped from the Beginning: the definitive history of racist ideas in America by Ibram X. Kendi	Anonymous School Library	Retained	AABB; RILA; Newspaper
2023/24	The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie	Anonymous School Library	Retained	ALA; AABB; RILA; Newspaper
2022	The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie	North Smithfield School Library	Unknown	AABB; Newspaper
2018	The Art of Being Normal by Lisa Williamson	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2023/24	The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas	Anonymous School Library	Removed from curriculum but retained in classroom/ school libraries	AABB; RILA; Newspaper
2022	The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2018	The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA

2022	The Truth about Alice by Jannifer Mathieu	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AAB; Newspaper
2023	The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AAB; Newspaper
2018	This Book is Gay by Juno Dawson	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	This One Summer by Mariko Tamaki	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AAB; Newspaper
2022	Tricks by Ellen Hopkins	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	ALA; AAB; Newspaper
2022	Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan	North Smithfield School District	Unknown	AAB; Newspaper
2018	Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2021	Two Grooms on a Cake by Rob Sanders	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Were I not a Girl: the inspiring and true story of Dr. James Barry by Lisa Robinson	Smithfield School District	Retained	ALA; AAB; Newspaper
2021	Were I not a Girl: the inspiring and true story of Dr. James Barry by Lisa Robinson	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA
2022	Without Shame [author unidentified]	Anonymous	Unknown	ALA

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or would like to discuss further, please feel free to contact Michelle Arias, Director of Intergovernmental Affairs at marias@sos.ri.gov.

Sincerely,

Kate Wells,
State Librarian

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RESOLUTION OF THE PORTSMOUTH SCHOOL COMMITTEE IN SUPPORT OF RI S0238 and H5726 — THE FREEDOM TO READ ACT

WHEREAS, the Portsmouth School Committee affirms that the freedom to read is a foundational principle of a democratic society, protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Article I, Section 21 of the Rhode Island Constitution; and

WHEREAS, the ability of students to access diverse viewpoints through age-appropriate, professionally curated library materials fosters critical thinking, civic engagement, and empathy; and

WHEREAS, the concept of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding doors enables students to see themselves reflected, understand others' experiences, and explore the broader world, promoting inclusion and intellectual growth; and

WHEREAS, certified school librarians are trained professionals entrusted with curating library collections that meet the developmental and educational needs of all students, and their professional autonomy should be respected and protected; and

WHEREAS, the Freedom to Read Act (H5726) upholds these principles by prohibiting censorship of library materials, ensuring due process in reconsideration requests, and protecting educators from punitive actions related to good-faith professional decisions;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED,

that the Portsmouth School Committee expresses its strong support for H5726, the Freedom to Read Act, and urges the Rhode Island General Assembly to pass this legislation to safeguard students' rights to read, learn, and grow in an open and inclusive educational environment.

WHERETO: The following bear witness:

Emily Copeland School Committee Chair

Karen McDaid, School Committee Clerk

Thomas W. Kenworthy, Superintendent of Schools

Passed: _____

TO: Roger Williams University Faculty Senate
FROM: ?????
RE: Resolution: Supporting and Defending the Freedom to Read
Date: ????????

WHEREAS, the suppression of books, educational materials, and literature has escalated in libraries, particularly school libraries and public libraries.

WHEREAS, efforts to challenge, restrict, or ban access to library materials disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. According to American Library Association data, in 2023, the year with the most recent data collected, analyzed and made public, 47% of books targeted for censorship in the United States were about LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals.

WHEREAS, the freedom to read is foundational to an informed and educated student body and democracy.

WHEREAS, censorship poses a direct threat to academic freedom and violates the principles outlined in the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure (AAUP, 1940; reaffirmed 1970, 2020);

WHEREAS, we draw inspiration from our namesake, the radical and visionary 17th-century leader, Roger Williams, who founded Providence and Rhode Island on his beliefs in freedom of conscience, equality and tolerance.

WHEREAS, our core values include that we will meet the educational needs of a diverse multigenerational community of learners.

WHEREAS, our core values include that we will create a community in which diversity is visible in its population and culture and by implementing explicit institution-wide practices that advance equity and belonging.

WHEREAS, the Roger Williams University Library's mission includes access to resources that enhance research and inquiry without bias or censorship and a commitment to intellectual freedom and freedom of access to information.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that:

1. The Faculty Senate affirms its unequivocal support for the Freedom to Read as a fundamental principle of higher education and democratic society;
2. The Faculty Senate opposes any and all attempts that seek to prohibit, restrict, or censor access to books, curricula, or scholarly materials based on ideological or political motivations;
3. The Faculty Senate stands with our K-12 colleagues and public librarians throughout the country who may be affected by attempts to censor, impermissibly challenge, and ban books and materials;
4. The Faculty Senate urges faculty members, students, and community stakeholders to actively advocate for policies that ensure access to diverse materials, including working with professional organizations to combat censorship efforts;
5. The Faculty Senate directs that copies of this resolution be shared with the University Administration, the Board of Trustees, Student Senate, the School of Law, and relevant state and national educational bodies as a formal statement of our commitment to academic freedom and the freedom to read;
6. The Faculty Senate affirms the [Joint Statement on Efforts to Restrict Education about Racism](#), authored by the AAUP, PEN America, the American Historical Association, and the Association of American Colleges & Universities, endorsed by over seventy organizations, and issued on June 16, 2021.

Adopted this [day] of [month], [year] by the Faculty Senate of [Institution Name].

Advocacy Training Event

Freedom to Read

Focus: Freedom to Read
Sunday, March 30, 2025
2:00 pm — 3:00 pm

Location: Barrington Public Library
281 County Rd.
Barrington, RI 02806

Welcome

Mr. Braxton Howard Cloutier
Barrington Town Council President

Introduction

Rev. Eugene Dyszlewski
RISCC Social Justice Commissioner

Faith Perspective

Rabbi Howard Voss-Altman
Temple Habonim

Censorship - the Problem

Ms. Liz Gotauco
Children's Librarian & Author

Freedom to Read Bill

Rep. Jennifer Boylan
Bill Sponsor

Advocacy Tools

Mr. Jeremy Langill
RISCC Executive Minister

Postcards & Banned Books

Ms. Haley Lott,
Law Librarian
Rev. Raquel Ray, Associate Pastor,
Barrington Congregational UCC
Ms. Nicole Dyszlewski,
Professor & Asst. Dean, Roger Williams School of Law
Lead Organizer Freedom to Read Coalition



**Statement by Skip Dye, Penguin Random House
Chair, Intellectual Freedom Taskforce
Senate Education Committee Hearing:
March 12, 2025**

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Penguin Random House and as Chair of our Intellectual Freedom Taskforce. We are expressing our staunch support for Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act S0238, which when passed will be the strongest law in the nation protecting the First Amendment at the state level. In this moment of rising censorship and an unpredictable federal government, Rhode Island will set the national standard for protecting the rights of its citizens.

As the world's largest trade book publisher, Penguin Random House deeply values the freedom to read, a fundamental American right protected by the First Amendment and the Rhode Island Constitution. Our mission is to create books for everyone, and we are proud to publish a wide range of ideas and stories from across the spectrum of identities, viewpoints, and perspectives.

Rising Book Challenges and Censorship

There has been a significant rise in attempts to remove books from schools and libraries. Pen America reported over 10,000 book challenges or bans in the 2023-2024 academic year, a record high—and public libraries saw a 92% increase in censored titles. Even these numbers do not capture the scope of the problem—American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom notes that 82-97% of book challenges are undocumented. Additionally, 71% of voters oppose book bans, and 91% believe others should not control what their families read.

Rhode Island librarians and educators diligently curate their collections to align with the needs, ages, and reading levels of their patrons and students. The process of challenging books diverts resources that libraries could otherwise allocate to community or academic support. A huge portion of book challenges originate from a small cohort of individuals who repeatedly contest the same titles nationwide. Rhode Island has experienced a notable increase in such challenges, primarily directed at literature featuring LGBTQ+ themes, people of color, and other historically marginalized communities.

Protections for Rhode Island Students, Libraries, and Schools

The Freedom to Read bill ensures that residents of Rhode Island have access to a diverse range of ideas and information. This legislation aligns Rhode Island law with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as well as Section 21 of the Rhode Island Constitution. S0238 strengthens and standardizes library guidelines for acquisition and review, ensuring librarians and educators can select age-relevant materials for all readers. It prevents censorship efforts by external parties by mandating that individuals who want to contest library materials must reside in the library's service area or be students at the school.

The Freedom to Read bill safeguards libraries and schools against baseless legal actions by awarding legal fees to institutions that prevail in censorship lawsuits. This legislation requires individuals seeking to ban books to bear the financial costs associated with their legal challenges.



Additionally, the Freedom to Read bill shields librarians, teachers, and museum employees from civil and criminal charges for materials available in their collections. This aligns Rhode Island with all other New England states that have protections for library workers for work performed as part of their job.

Support for Rhode Island's Creative Economy

The Freedom to Read bill champions Rhode Island's vibrant creative economy by safeguarding the rights to free expression for businesses and creators. It enshrines the existing federal Miller test standards in state law to define obscenity for both adults and minors. This bill ensures that no book can be censored based on its ideology or identity of the content or its creator, thereby nurturing and protecting the diverse voices that contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of Rhode Island.

Maintaining Decision-Making Power for Educators and Parents

The Freedom to Read bill maintains decision-making power for parents, allowing them to guide their child's reading without dictating the reading choices of other children. It maintains the principles of the First Amendment and anti-discrimination laws, ensuring that all libraries are places of learning, inclusion, and open discourse—not areas for ideological censorship. It confirms that students in Rhode Island have the right to read, think independently, and engage with literature that represents the diversity of their world.

Affirm Rhode Island's Commitment to Free Speech, Pass S0238

We urge you to support the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act S0238. It protects our rights to read and to be read freely. This bill ensures creators can express their ideas without censorship, fostering a richly diverse literary culture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Skip Dye", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Skip Dye
Chair
Penguin Random House Intellectual Freedom Taskforce
1745 Broadway
NY, NY 10019
212-782-8417
sdye@penguinrandomhouse.com



WRITTEN TESTIMONY

Bill No.: SB-238
Primary Sponsors: An Act Relating to Libraries – The Freedom to Read Act
Committee: Senators McKenney, Bissailon, Gallo, Gu, Lawson, Tikoian, Britto
Date: Senate Committee on Education
March 12, 2025

The Rhode Island Women's Bar Association ("RIWBA") supports this bill. RIWBA is a non-profit organization that promotes the advancement of the status of women in the State of Rhode Island and in the legal profession.

The Freedom to Read Act is designed to protect the rights enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the Rhode Island Constitution. It ensures that all Rhode Islanders have free access to a wide array of books and materials, shielding libraries, librarians, schools, and teachers from frivolous and expensive lawsuits and challenges from special interest groups outside their communities.

It aligns Rhode Island with 44 other states, including all other New England states, that have protections for library workers performing their professional duties. By standardizing guidelines for library acquisition and review policies, the bill ensures that all Rhode Island libraries have written policies that meet state guidelines and establish uniform procedures for handling challenges. This legislation is vital for maintaining a robust marketplace of ideas and fostering a well-informed, democratic society.

Reading a wide variety of texts and authors is fundamental to developing critical reading skills and comprehension. Exposure to different perspectives and writing styles enhances students' ability to think critically, analyze complex issues, and understand nuanced arguments. These skills are crucial for developing future leaders and lawyers who must navigate and interpret differing viewpoints and legal precedents. By ensuring access to a broad spectrum of literature, the Freedom to Read Act plays a vital role in preparing our youth for leadership roles and careers in law, where critical thinking and comprehensive understanding are paramount.

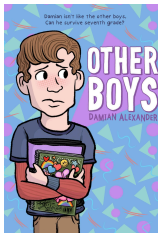
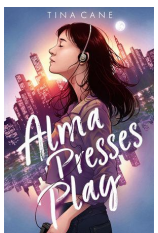
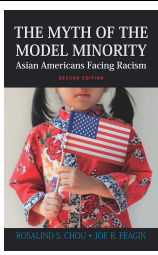
By supporting the Freedom to Read Act, we safeguard the rights of every Rhode Islander to access varying ideas and information and ensure that our libraries and schools remain places of learning, growth, and exploration. The Rhode Island Women's Bar Association urges you to vote in favor of the Freedom to Read Act and protect the fundamental freedoms that are the cornerstone of our democratic society.

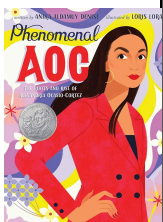
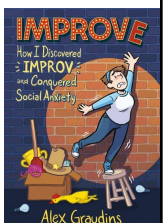
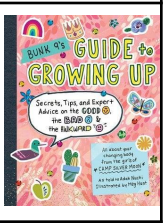
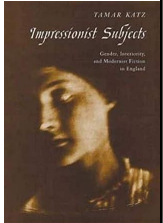
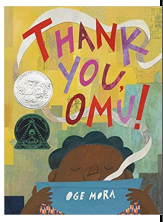
RIWBA contact: Legislative and Policy Committee Chair, Jennifer L. Sylvia,
riwomensbar@gmail.com

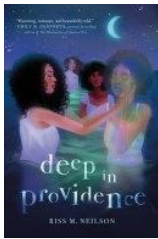
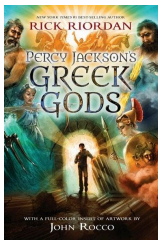
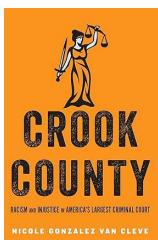
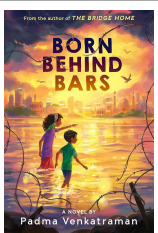
Authors Against Book Bans

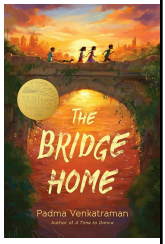
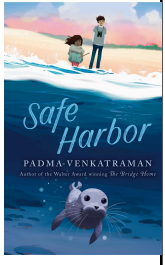
Books by Rhode Island creators that have been challenged, banned, or soft censored* in the last five years

*Soft censorship, also known as quiet censorship or self-censorship, is when a book is purposefully limited, restricted, removed, or never purchased, although it would serve the community.

Creator Name	Title	Book Type	Details on challenge/censorship	Cover Image
Damian Alexander	Other Boys	GN Memoir	Challenged in GA, VA, IL, and OR. Access restricted to older age than publisher guidelines, Oconee County Library, GA in 2024.	
Jeanette Bradley	Something Great	Fiction PB	Challenged in NE. Soft censorship* elsewhere.	
Tina Cane	Alma Presses Play	YA Fiction	A target of known soft censorship.*	
Rosalind S. Chou.	The myth of the model minority : Asian Americans facing racism	Adult NF	Removed from the Naval Academy library in response to an order by the Defense Secretary.	
Anika Aldamuy Denise	Planting Stories	Picture Book NF	Among the dozens of titles gifted to Northampton, PA Area School District but declined after community members objected.	

Anika Aldamuy Denise	Phenomenal AOC	Nonfiction PB	A target of known soft censorship.	
Alex Gaudins	Improve: How I Discovered Improv and Conquered Social Anxiety	GN Memoir	Challenged in Texas	
Meg Hunt	Bunk 9's Guide to Growing Up	Illustrated MG nonfiction	Challenged in NY and PA	
Cathy G Johnson	The Breakaways	GN Fiction	Has been removed from shelves or has been restricted to age groups older than those its publisher and librarian reviewers recommend, in at least 48 school districts in multiple states.	
Tamar Katz.	Impressionist subjects : gender, interiority, and modernist fiction in England	Adult NF	Removed from the Naval Academy library in response to an order by the Defense Secretary.	
Oge Mora	Saturday	Fiction PB	Pulled off shelves in Central York, PA schools in 2021 by the school administration. It was later returned.	
Oge Mora	Thank You, Omu	Fiction PB	Challenged in ID. Pulled off shelves in Central York, PA schools in 2021 by the school administration. It was later returned.	

Riss Neilson	Deep in Providence	Fiction YA	Challenged in IL.	
Miriam Reumann	American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports	Adult NF	Removed from the Naval Academy library in response to an order by the Defense Secretary.	
John Rocco	Percy Jackson's Greek Gods	Illustrated MG	Challenged and removed from shelves in Clay County District Schools in Green Cove Springs, FL.	
Lewis C. Seifert .	Fairytales , sexuality, and gender in France, 1690-1715 : nostalgic utopias	Adult NF	Removed from the Naval Academy library in response to an order by the Defense Secretary.	
Nicole Gonzalez VanCleve	Crook County : racism and injustice in America's largest criminal court	Adult NF	Removed from the Naval Academy library in response to an order by the Defense Secretary.	
Padma Venkatraman	Born Behind Bars	Fiction MG	Challenged and removed from Pinellas County, FL schools before being returned to shelves. Also challenged in TX.	

Padma Venkatraman	The Bridge Home	Fiction MG	Challenged in a private school in Massachusetts. It was successfully defended by a teacher in the school.	
Padma Venkatraman	Safe Harbor	Fiction MG	A known target of soft censorship	

The Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act (S0238, H5726)

Protects our fundamental American rights to free speech, free inquiry and the right to form and express our own opinions, as laid out by the First Amendment and the Rhode Island Constitution.

- Maintains Rhode Islanders' free access to the marketplace of ideas and information.
- Shields libraries and schools from frivolous lawsuits and challenges from special interest groups outside their communities.
- Upholds the right to free expression for businesses in Rhode Island's creative economy.
- Ensures the majority of voters are heard over special interest groups.

Here's why:

- **Nationwide, documented book challenges have increased over 675% since 2020.** (American Library Association) Most censorship is not documented or reported, so this is an undercount of the scale of the problem.
- **Nationally, 71% of voters oppose book bans (ALA); 91% agree other people shouldn't control what their families can read.** (EveryLibrary)
- **Librarians already carefully curate their collections to meet the needs, ages, and reading levels of their patrons.** Book challenges drain resources libraries could use to help their communities.
- **Most book challenges come from a small group of people** who repeatedly challenge the same books across the country. The Washington Post found half of all book ban attempts nationally were made by just 11 people.

Here's how:

- **Protects library users from censorship attempts by outside groups.** Requires those wishing to bring challenges against library materials to live in the service area of the library or attend the school.
- **Protects libraries and schools from frivolous lawsuits.** Grants legal fees to libraries and schools that win censorship cases, discouraging the use of lawsuits to intentionally deplete their funding.
- **Shields librarians, teachers, and museum employees from civil and criminal charges for materials available in their collections.** Aligns Rhode Island with the 40+ states, including all other New England states, that have protections for library workers for work performed as part of their job.
- **Protects the freedom of expression for Rhode Island's creators.** Creates a safe harbor for free speech rights by defining obscenity with the existing federal Miller test standards for adults and minors, and prohibiting censoring books based on ideology or identity of the work's content or creator.
- **Standardizes guidelines for library acquisition and review policies.** Requires all Rhode Island libraries to have written policies that meet state guidelines and establish standard procedures for handling challenges.

Sources: American Library Association (ALA): <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers>

EveryLibrary: https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/review_recent_book_ban_polls

Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/23/lgbtq-book-ban-challengers/>



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IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2025

RELATING TO LIBRARIES -- THE FREEDOM TO READ ACT

Referred To: Senate Education

1 SECTION 1. Title 29 of the General Laws entitled "LIBRARIES" is hereby amended by
2 adding thereto the following chapter:

THE FREEDOM TO READ ACT

As used in this chapter:

18 (iii) That the work, taken as a whole, clearly lacks serious literary, artistic, educational,
19 political, or scientific value.

1 (2) "Developmentally inappropriate" means the material is not structured to account for a
2 child's age, and is misaligned with the cognitive, emotional or social development of the intended
3 age group as informed by standards and guidance from the American Library Association (ALA)
4 or any other similar well recognized and established educational or developmental authority.

5 (3) "Government actor" means a member of a government body with voting authority.

6 (4) "Government body" means any government decision-making body or governing body,
7 such as a library board or school board, that exercises authority over the purchasing, selection,
8 curation, and location of library materials at the state or municipal levels, including a library board
9 of trustees as provided for in § 29-4-5 and a school committee as provided for in § 16-2-9.

10 (5) "Individual with a vested interest in the public library" means any resident who is served
11 by the public library and resides in the municipality where the library is situated.

12 (6) "Individual with a vested interest in the school library" means any teaching staff
13 member employed by the school district, any parent or guardian of a student enrolled in the school
14 at the time the removal form is filed, and any student enrolled in the school at the time the removal
15 form is filed.

16 (7) "Library material" means any material including, but not limited to, books, videos,
17 subscription or locally curated databases, audio materials, government documents, interactive
18 applications and software, and all other similar materials, whether tangible or in electronic form
19 belonging to, on loan to, or otherwise in the custody of the public library or other material not
20 required as part of classroom instruction.

21 (8) "Librarian" means a professionally trained employee who is responsible for the
22 purchase, selection, curation, removal, and display of library materials.

23 (9) "Public library" means a library in a city or town that has been designated by the city
24 or town council or town financial meeting as a library to provide library services to all individuals
25 residing in the city or town.

26 (10) "Reconsideration" means a request to reclassify, move to a different section of the
27 library, or remove an item in the library's collection.

28 **29-9-3. Public library collection policy.**

29 (a) In addition to the duties prescribed in § 29-3.1-7, the chief of library services shall
30 establish a model policy on the curation of library material within a public library, that shall be
31 approved and adopted by the library board of trustees.

32 (b) The model policy shall, at a minimum:

33 (1) Recognize that public libraries serve as centers for voluntary inquiry and the
34 dissemination of information and ideas;

1 (2) Provide protection against censorship of library material;

2 (3) Provide standards for the selection and curation of library material by the librarian,
3 while also recognizing that library material should be provided for the interest, information, and
4 enlightenment of all people, and should present a wide range of points of view; and

5 (4) Establish criteria and a procedure based on professional standards for a librarian to
6 review and the deaccession of library material within a public library on an ongoing basis, which
7 shall include, but not be limited to, the library material's relevance, the condition of the library
8 material, the availability of duplicates, the availability of more recent material, and the continued
9 demand for the library material.

10 (c) The model policy shall be updated as the chief of library services deems necessary.

11 (d) In the event a public library has a policy that complies with the requirements of
12 subsection (b) of this section, the library shall not be required to take further action.

13 (e) Nothing in this section shall be construed to require a librarian to purchase, or otherwise
14 acquire a particular library material for the library.

15 (f) In addition to the duties prescribed in § 29-3.1-7, the chief of library services shall
16 establish a model policy creating a procedure regarding a request for reconsideration of library
17 material in a public library, that shall be approved and adopted by the library board of trustees.

18 (g) The model policy shall, at a minimum require:

19 (1) The creation of a request for reconsideration form, based on a model form established
20 by the chief of library services, that shall be submitted by an individual with a vested interest in the
21 public library in order to initiate the review of specific library material;

22 (2) That an individual with a vested interest in the public library requesting that library
23 material be reconsidered shall review the material as a whole, identify sections of the material that
24 the individual objects to, and provide an explanation for such objections. Selective passages from
25 the material taken out of context shall not be considered under this review.

26 (3) That library material that is the subject of a request for reconsideration shall not be
27 removed from its location within the library and shall remain available to reserve, check out, or
28 access while the material is being reviewed;

29 (4) That the government body shall appoint a review committee, consisting of:

30 (i) At least one member of the government body;

31 (ii) The director of the public library;

32 (iii) A subject specialist librarian employed by the public library; and

33 (iv) Any additional library staff that the government body deems necessary;

34 (5) That the review committee pursuant to subsection (g)(4) of this section evaluate the

1 request for removal form, review the challenged library material, and report in writing its decision
2 to the individual and to the government body on whether to remove library material within thirty
3 (30) business days from the date of receiving the form; and

4 (6) That the individual who filed the form for reconsideration may, within thirty (30) days
5 of the decision, appeal the review committee's decision to the government body which shall review
6 the committee's decision and make a final determination on whether the library material is to be
7 removed from the public library, limited in use or remain in place. A substantive rationale for
8 restricting or removing library material shall be memorialized by the governing body in writing
9 and made publicly available.

10 In issuing its final decision, a governing body shall provide a written statement of reasons
11 for:

12 (i) The removal, limitation, or non-removal of a library material; and

13 (ii) Any final determination that is contrary to the recommendations of the review
14 committee;

15 (7) That any library material that has been challenged pursuant to subsections (g)(1)
16 through (g)(6) of this section shall not be subject to a subsequent challenge for at least one year;

17 (8) That the review committee when conducting a review pursuant to this section, and a
18 governing body deciding an appeal of a decision of the review committee shall consider the
19 following standards for review:

20 (i) Recognize that library material should be provided for the interest, information, and
21 enlightenment of all people and should present diverse points of view in the collection as a whole;

22 (ii) Acknowledge that library material shall not be removed from a library because of the
23 origin, background, or views of the library material or those contributing to its creation;

24 (iii) Recognize the importance of libraries as centers for voluntary inquiry and the
25 dissemination of information and ideas; and

26 (iv) Promote the free expression and free access to ideas by prohibiting the censorship of
27 library material.

28 (h) In the event a public library has a policy that complies with the requirements of
29 subsection (g) of this section, the library shall not be required to take further action.

30 (i) Any staff member of a public library, including a librarian employed by a public library,
31 shall be immune from civil and criminal liability arising from good faith actions performed
32 pursuant to this chapter.

33 (j) A government body shall not reduce funding for a public library due to the library's
34 compliance with the provisions of this section.

1 **29-9-4. School library collection policy.**

2 (a) Pursuant to the duties prescribed in § 16-1-5(7), the commissioner of elementary and
3 secondary education, in collaboration with the chief of library services, shall establish a model
4 policy on the curation of library material within a school library. Each school committee shall
5 review the model policy established pursuant to this section and approve and adopt a policy that
6 shall at a minimum:

7 (1) Recognize that school libraries serve as centers for voluntary inquiry and the
8 dissemination of information and ideas;

9 (2) Provide protection against censorship of library material;

10 (3) Provide standards for the selection and curation of library material while also
11 recognizing that the library material should be provided for the interest, information, and
12 enlightenment of all students and should present a wide range of points of view;

13 (4) Establish criteria and a procedure based on professional standards for a librarian to
14 review and the deaccession of library material within a school library on a regular basis, which
15 shall include, but not be limited to, the library material's relevance; the condition of the library
16 material; the availability of duplicates; and the continued demand for the library material;

17 (5) Acknowledge that a certified school librarian is professionally trained to curate and
18 develop the school library collection that provides students with access to the widest array of
19 developmentally relevant library material.

20 (b) The model policy shall be updated as the commissioner of elementary and secondary
21 education and chief of library services deem necessary.

22 (c) In the event a school district has a policy that complies with the requirements of
23 subsection (a) of this section, the school committee shall not be required to take further action.

24 (d) Librarians employed at a school library shall have discretion in selecting, purchasing,
25 or acquiring library material for inclusion in the school library, following the policy approved by
26 the school committee. Nothing in this section shall be construed to require a librarian to purchase,
27 or otherwise acquire a particular library material for a school library.

28 (e) Nothing in this section shall be construed to restrict a school committee's authority to
29 select textbooks and school supplies related to the curriculum.

30 (f) Pursuant to the duties prescribed in § 16-1-5(7), the commissioner of elementary and
31 secondary education shall establish, in collaboration with the chief of library services, a model
32 policy creating a procedure regarding a request for reconsideration of library material within a
33 school library. The school committee shall review the model policy established pursuant to this
34 section and approve and adopt a policy that shall, at a minimum require:

1 (1) The creation of a request for reconsideration form, based on a model form developed
2 by the commissioner of elementary and secondary education and chief of library services, that is
3 submitted by an individual with a vested interest to the principal of the school in which the library
4 material is challenged. The principal is required to send the form promptly to the superintendent to
5 initiate a review of the material;

6 (2) An individual with a vested interest in the school library requesting that library material
7 be reconsidered shall review the material as a whole, identify sections of the material that the
8 individual objects, to and provide an explanation for such objections. Selective passages from the
9 material taken out of context shall not be considered for this review;

10 (3) Library material that is the subject of a request for reconsideration shall not be removed
11 from its location within the library and shall remain available to reserve, check out, or access while
12 the material is being reviewed;

13 (4) The superintendent or the superintendent's designee shall appoint a review committee;
14 consisting of:

15 (i) The superintendent or the superintendent's designee;

16 (ii) The principal of the school in which the form is submitted or the principal's designee;

17 (iii) A certified librarian employed at the school in which the form is submitted;

18 (iv) A representative of the school committee; and

19 (v) A grade-appropriate teacher provided the teacher selected is not the individual who
20 submitted the form;

21 (5) The review committee must evaluate the reconsideration request, review the material
22 and within thirty (30) days of receiving the reconsideration form report in writing to the individual
23 and the school committee its decision whether to remove the library material, limit the library
24 material, or leave the library material in place;

25 (6) That the individual who filed the form for reconsideration may, within thirty (30) days
26 of the decision, appeal the review committee's decision to the school committee which shall review
27 the committee's report and issue a final recommendation along with a written statement of reasons
28 for:

29 (i) The removal, limitation, or non-removal of a library material;

30 (ii) Any final determination that is contrary to the recommendations of the review
31 committee; and

32 (iii) The written statement of reasons shall be posted on the school committees Internet
33 website in a prominent and easily accessible location within thirty (30) days of the determination.

34 (7) The review committee, when conducting a review pursuant to this section and a school

1 committee deciding an appeal of the review committee, shall consider the following standards for
2 review:

3 (i) Recognize that library material should be provided for the interest, information, and
4 enlightenment of all students and should present diverse points of view in the collection as a whole;

5 (ii) Acknowledge that library material shall not be removed from a school library because
6 of the origin, background, or views of the library material or those contributing to its creation;

7 (iii) Recognize the importance of school libraries as centers for voluntary inquiry and the
8 dissemination of information and ideas;

9 (iv) Promote the free expression and free access to ideas by students by prohibiting the
10 censorship of library material; and

11 (v) Acknowledge that a school library media specialist is professionally trained to curate
12 and develop the school library collection that provides students with access to the widest array of
13 developmentally appropriate library material available to schools;

14 (g) In the event a school committee has a policy that complies with the requirements of
15 subsection (a) of this section, the school committee shall not be required to take further action.

16 (h) Any staff member of a school library, including a librarian employed by a school, shall
17 be immune from civil and criminal liability arising from good faith actions performed pursuant to
18 this chapter.

19 **29-9-5. Declaratory and injunctive relief.**

20 (a) A librarian who has been subjected to discipline, termination, or threats of discipline or
21 termination for refusing to censor library materials in violation of policies established pursuant to
22 this chapter may seek relief against a government body in any court of competent jurisdiction for
23 declaratory and injunctive relief including, but not limited to, reinstatement, back pay, restoration
24 of benefits, and such other equitable relief as may be appropriate and necessary to make the
25 employee whole.

26 (b) An individual with a vested interest in a school or public library may seek relief in any
27 court of competent jurisdiction for declaratory and injunctive relief against a government body that
28 enforces censorship of library materials in violation of policies established pursuant to this chapter.

29 (1) A student, or the student's parent(s) or guardian(s), may only challenge censorship of
30 library materials relating to a school that the student attends.

31 (c) An author whose library materials have been subjected to censorship may bring an
32 action in any court of competent jurisdiction for declaratory and injunctive relief against any
33 government body that enforces censorship of library materials in violation of policies established
34 pursuant to this chapter.

1 (d) Any school or library employee acting pursuant to direct orders from a municipal, state,
2 or federal government authority shall not be liable for censorship.

3 (e) Any action or proceeding to enforce this section shall be commenced no later than one
4 year after the date on which the violation of this section is committed.

5 SECTION 2. Sections 11-31-1 and 11-31-10 of the General Laws in Chapter 11-31 entitled
6 "Obscene and Objectionable Publications and Shows" are hereby amended to read as follows:

7 **11-31-1. Circulation of obscene publications and shows.**

8 (a) Every person who willfully or knowingly promotes for the purpose of commercial gain
9 within the community any show, motion picture, performance, photograph, book, magazine, or
10 other material which is obscene shall, upon conviction, be punished by a fine of not less than one
11 hundred dollars (\$100) nor more than one thousand dollars (\$1,000), or by imprisonment for not
12 more than two (2) years, or both.

13 (b) For the purpose of this section:

14 (1) In determining whether or not a show, motion picture, performance, photograph, book,
15 magazine, or other material is obscene the trier of the fact must find:

16 (i) That the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that
17 the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;

18 (ii) That the work taken as a whole, clearly depicts or describes, in a patently offensive
19 way, sexual conduct specifically defined by this chapter; and

20 (iii) That the work, taken as a whole, clearly lacks serious literary, artistic, educational,
21 political, or scientific value.

22 (2) "Community standards" means the geographical area of the state of Rhode Island.

23 (3) "Knowingly" means having knowledge of the character and content of the material or
24 failure on notice to exercise reasonable inspection which would disclose the content and character
25 of it.

26 (4) "Material" means anything tangible which is capable of being used or adapted to arouse
27 prurient interest through the medium of reading, or observation.

28 (5) "Patently offensive" means so offensive on its face as to affront current standards of
29 decency.

30 (6) "Performance" means any play, motion picture, dance, or other exhibition performed
31 before an audience.

32 (7) "Promote" means to manufacture, issue, sell, give, provide, lend, mail, deliver, transfer,
33 transmit, publish, distribute, circulate, disseminate, present, exhibit, or advertise or to offer or agree
34 to do it for resale.

1 (8) "Sexual conduct" means:

2 (i) An act of sexual intercourse, normal or perverted, actual or simulated, including genital-
3 genital, anal-genital, or oral-genital intercourse, whether between human beings or between a
4 human being and an animal.

5 (ii) Sado-masochistic abuse, meaning flagellation or torture by or upon a person in an act
6 of apparent sexual stimulation or gratification.

7 (iii) Masturbation, excretory functions, and lewd exhibitions of the genitals.

8 (9) "Standards of decency" means community standards of decency.

9 (c) If any of the depictions and descriptions of sexual conduct described in this section are
10 declared by a court of competent jurisdiction to be unlawfully included because the depictions or
11 descriptions are constitutionally protected or for any other reason, that declaration shall not
12 invalidate this chapter as to other sexual conduct included in this chapter.

13 **11-31-10. Sale or exhibition to minors of indecent publications, pictures, or articles.**

14 (a) Every person who shall willfully or knowingly engage in the business of selling,
15 lending, giving away, showing, advertising for sale, or distributing to any person under the age of
16 eighteen (18) years, has in his or her possession with intent to engage in that business or to
17 otherwise offer for sale or commercial distribution to any person under the age of eighteen (18)
18 years, or who shall display at newsstands or any other business establishment frequented by persons
19 under the age of eighteen (18) years or where persons under the age of eighteen (18) years are or
20 may be invited as a part of the general public, any motion picture, any still picture, photograph, or
21 any book, pocket book, pamphlet, or magazine of which the cover or content consists of explicit
22 representations of "sexual conduct", "sexual excitement", "nudity" and which is indecent for minors
23 or which is predominantly made up of descriptions of "sexual conduct", "sexual excitement",
24 "nudity" and which is indecent, shall, upon conviction, be punished by a fine of not less than one
25 hundred dollars (\$100) nor more than one thousand dollars (\$1,000), or by imprisonment for not
26 more than two (2) years, or both.

27 (b) As used in this section, the following words have the following meaning:

28 (1) "Indecent for minors" means:

29 (i) Appealing to the prurient interest in sex of minors;

30 (ii) ~~Patently~~ Taken as a whole is patently offensive to prevailing standards in the adult
31 community with respect to what is suitable material for minors; and

32 (iii) ~~Lacking~~ Clearly lacking serious literary, artistic, educational, political, or scientific
33 value for minors;

34 (2) "Knowingly" means having knowledge of the character and content of the publication

1 or failure on notice to exercise reasonable inspection which would disclose its content and
2 character;

3 (3) "Nudity" means less than completely and opaquely covered; human genitals, pubic
4 regions, buttock, and female breast below a point immediately above the top of the areola;

5 (4) "Sexual conduct" means act of human masturbation, sexual intercourse, sodomy,
6 fondling, or other erotic touching of human genitals, pubic region, buttock, or female breasts; and

7 (5) "Sexual excitement" means human genitals in a state of sexual stimulation or arousal.

8 SECTION 3. Chapter 11-31 of the General Laws entitled "Obscene and Objectionable
9 Publications and Shows" is hereby amended by adding thereto the following section:

10 **11-31-16. Affirmative defense.**

11 [\(a\) In any prosecution arising under §§ 11-31-1 or 11-31-10, it shall be an affirmative](#)
12 [defense that the defendant was a bona fide school, or public library, or was a person acting in](#)
13 [accordance with library collection policies pursuant to chapter 9 of title 29 and in the course of](#)
14 [employment as an employee or official of such an organization.](#)

15 SECTION 4. This act shall take effect upon passage.

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LC001099/SUB B
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EXPLANATION
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF
A N A C T
RELATING TO LIBRARIES -- THE FREEDOM TO READ ACT

- 1 This act would promote the free expression and free access of information by prohibiting
- 2 the censorship of library materials. This act would require the creation of a model policy relative
- 3 to library material within a public library and school library.
- 4 This act would take effect upon passage.

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LC001099/SUB B
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The Rising Tide of Censorship:

National and Rhode Island Statistics on Book Challenges and Bans

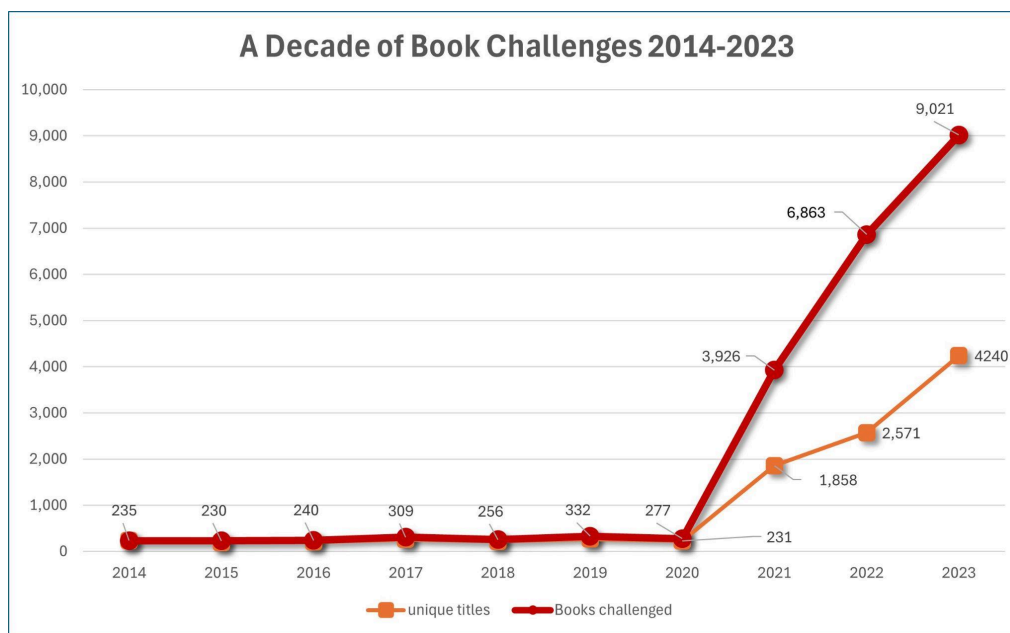
Censorship impacts Rhode Island readers and creators.

- 35 books were challenged in Rhode Island from 2020-24. Most challenges were in schools.
- 15 books by 11 Rhode Island authors and illustrators have been banned, challenged, or soft censored in the last five years.
- Censorship does not increase book sales except for rare exceptions. Instead, it harms creators.
- Most censorship is “soft” or “quiet” censorship and not reported in statistics.

(source for RI date: local news stories, ALA OIF data, PEN America data)

Censorship is rising nationally, fueled by small groups of people challenging long lists of books.

Nationally, book challenges and bans have grown exponentially in the last five years. Book challenges have shifted from individuals bringing a challenge against one book to small groups of people trying to ban lists of books.



Source: American Library Association Source: <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers>

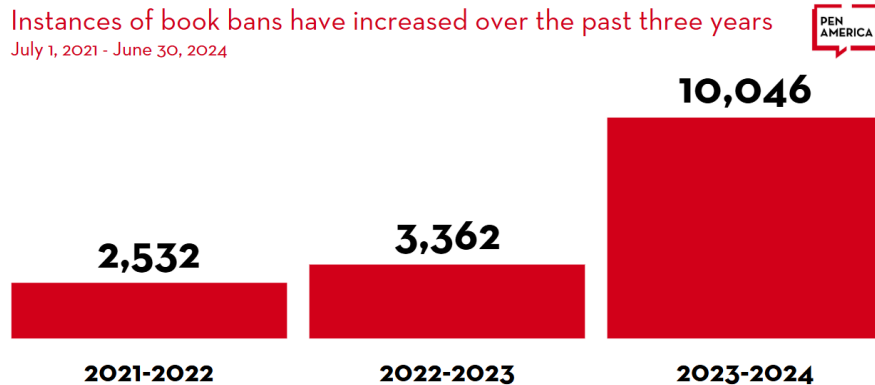
A 2023 analysis of book challenges nationwide by *The Washington Post* found:

- 42% of the books were challenged for having LGBTQ characters or themes.
- 28% of the books were challenged for having BIPOC characters or dealing with racism.
- **60% of book challenges were filed by the same 11 people.**

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/23/lgbtq-book-ban-challengers/>

Claims of “explicit content” in school libraries are exaggerated; most banned books have BIPOC or LGBTQ characters or content.

During the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America recorded **10,046** instances of book bans in American schools.



Data from PEN America Index of School Book Bans.

PEN America’s research into the 4,218 unique banned titles in the 2023-24 school year found:

- 36% featured fictional characters or real people of color.
- In history and biography titles, 44% featured people of color, with 26% specifically featuring Black people
- 29% included LGBTQ+ characters, people, or themes.
- 60% were young adult books, 30% were adult books. Only 2% were books for young children.

Why do we need these banned books?

- Books that address grief and death (55% of banned titles) can offer comfort and coping strategies, or a way to safely explore big emotions.
- Books that address substance use or abuse (40%) can increase understanding about the impact of addiction.
- Books about race and racism (20%) illuminate the ways in which these factors have impacted history and everyday life.
- Books on activism and social movements (15%) illustrate real and fictional stories about those who have worked to better the world in which they live.
- Books that touch on incarceration and policing (13%) can increase young people’s understanding of prison and policing systems, and foster empathy towards those impacted.
- Books about relationships, romance, and sexual experiences explore an aspect of the human experience. Despite the rhetoric around books being banned for containing “explicit content,” only 13% contained descriptions of sexual experiences on the page.

Source: PEN America <https://pen.org/report/beyond-the-shelves/>



RHODE ISLAND FREEDOM TO READ ACT (S0238, H5726) POSTCARD CAMPAIGN

You are invited to write a postcard to your state legislators to express your thoughts on the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act (Senate bill number S0238, House H5726)

1. 1. Open your postcard with a brief description of who you are:

Dear Sen./ Rep. _____

As a user of _____ library, I....

As a reader, I....

As a writer/teacher/artist/student/parent/constituent/etc., I....

2. Express your thoughts on the importance of our rights to free speech, free inquiry and the right to form and express our own opinions. This can be as simple as:

It is important to me to be able to choose my own reading material.

I want to be able to write without fear of government interference.

I value having a wide range of books available in my [library, child's school. etc]

3. End with an ask. Include bill number for House H5726 or Senate S0238

Please support...

Please vote for....

4. Sign your name.

Do not use a fake or pen name. Legislators want to hear from their real constituents. Including your home address and/or zip code shows that you live in the legislator's district.