May 13, 2025

As a united coalition of publishers, authors, illustrators, booksellers, educators, and allied organizations, we write to express our enthusiastic support for the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act (H5726 in the House and S0238A in the Senate). 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.

Rising National Censorship Threats

Across the United States, attempts to ban or restrict books—often those reflecting diverse voices, lived experiences, or challenging ideas—have reached unprecedented levels. 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. Rhode Island is no exception to this concerning trend. It has experienced a notable increase in challenges, primarily directed at literature featuring LGBTQ+ themes, people of color, and other historically marginalized communities.

Banning and restricting books is broadly unpopular amongst the general public. The Knight Foundation reported 71% of voters oppose book bans, and 91% believe others should not control what their families read. These campaigns undermine educators' professional judgment, impede free expression, and deprive young readers of the opportunity to see

themselves and to learn about the broader world. 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.

Protecting Rhode Island's Students, Libraries, and Schools

The Freedom to Read bill ensures Rhode Island residents access diverse ideas by adhering to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Section 21 of the Rhode Island Constitution. It allows librarians, teachers, and school boards to evaluate materials based on educational value while preserving parents' rights to discuss content with educators respectfully. This approach provides students with rich, age-appropriate collections and requires that only local residents or students can contest library materials, preventing external censorship efforts.

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.

Championing Rhode Island's Creative Economy

The Freedom to Read bill supports Rhode Island's creative economy by protecting the rights to free expression for businesses and creators. It incorporates the existing federal Miller test standards into state law to define obscenity for both adults and minors. This legislation guarantees that no book shall be subject to censorship based on its ideology or the identity of its content or creator. It aims to nurture and safeguard the diverse voices that enhance the cultural and economic vitality of Rhode Island. By upholding the freedom to read, Rhode Island not only protects First Amendment rights but also supports the creative ecosystem that drives employment, tourism, and community well-being.

Upholding Local Decision-Making and Constitutional Leadership

H5726/S0238A preserves local control by safeguarding the expertise of trained educators and librarians. It rejects heavy-handed edicts from special-interest groups, while honoring

the Constitution’s guarantee of free speech and free inquiry. In doing so, Rhode Island will reaffirm its reputation as a national leader in defending the rights of its citizens—past, present, and future—to read, think, and create without undue interference.

We urge you to support Rhode Island's Freedom to Read Act. This esteemed legislation fortifies the cherished right to read and be to read without hindrance. The bill is a stalwart defender of creators, ensuring that their voices can resonate freely and triumphantly, nurturing a richly diverse and vibrant literary culture that is the pride of Rhode Island.

Thank you for your consideration.

Signed:

Penguin Random House
Hachette Book Group
Macmillan Publishers
Simon & Schuster
Sourcebooks
Authors Guild
National Council of Teachers of English
American Bookseller Association
Authors Against Book Bans