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**Testimony Re: Budget Articles 5 and 9 Relating to School Buildings
Bond, School Construction, and Education
Joint Hearing of the Senate Finance and Education Committees
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director**

Chairman Conley, Chairwoman Gallo, and members of the Senate Finance and Education Committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Budget Article 5, Question 1, the School Construction Bond, and Article 9.

Article 5, Question 1

Article 5 submits budget referenda to the Rhode Island voters for their approval, including Question 1 which provides \$250 million in public obligation bonds for the construction, renovation, and rehabilitation of Rhode Island public schools. The state cannot issue more than \$250 million in notes over a five-year period and not more than \$100 million in notes in any single year.

The necessity of this once-in-a-generation investment was made clear both in the *State of Rhode Island Schoolhouses* report that was released in September 2017 and during the follow-up research and analysis conducted by the Rhode Island School Building Task Force, of which I was a member.

The *State of Rhode Island Schoolhouses* report, a year-long assessment of the status of our state's school facilities, found that only 12.4% of school buildings are in good to average condition and determined that \$627.6 million in high-priority construction and repairs is needed just to address building safety and code compliance issues. A total of \$2.2 billion in funding will be needed to bring all school buildings into ideal condition. This report also showed that there are urgent needs in every corner of our state and not just in a handful communities.

Some people ask if the condition of schools affects the learning and behavior of students and teachers. We know that it does. When roofs are falling in, classrooms have leaky ceilings, and students cannot see out of old and frosted windows, students and teachers both feel that we are saying they don't matter. Investing in our school buildings will demonstrate to Rhode Island's students, teachers, and staff that they are valued. We cannot have world-class education in Rhode Island without facilities to support learning and teaching, and the time to make this investment is now.

Article 9

Article 9 introduces incentives to the traditional School Housing Aid Construction Program targeted toward high-priority projects, including projects

that address health and safety deficiencies, replace or consolidate school buildings, or focus on specific high-demand areas, such as science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM), early childhood education, career and technical education, and technology-enabled facilities.

These incentives will be provided by providing bonuses to the state share ratio, a strategy that is common in other states, including Massachusetts, and that has been used in Rhode Island in the past to support high-priority projects, such as asbestos removal, ADA compliance, and energy efficiency.

The Rhode Island School Building Task Force carefully considered these priorities based on the goal that:

1. All schools will be warm, safe, and dry.
2. All schools will have 21st century learning environments.
3. Every school will see meaningful improvements to the condition of its public school buildings.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports these priorities, which will ensure that all students are being educated in safe environments that support their learning and that they have access to the types of facilities needed to succeed in the 21st century, in particular high-quality early childhood classrooms and the types of technology-enabled and hands-on learning laboratories that support college and career readiness.

We are particularly supportive of the recommendation that the Rhode Island School Building Authority develop and maintain a “kit of parts” with high-quality designs for different types of building features, including early childhood classrooms and science labs. We recommend that this “kit of parts” draw from existing knowledge of the features that support a high-quality early childhood classroom, including the knowledge and resources of the Rhode Island Child Care & Early Learning Facilities Fund at LISC (the Local Initiatives Support Corporation). Early learning classrooms are not supposed to look the same as classrooms for older students. They need to be designed to support the developmental needs of young children. Involving experts at Rhode Island Child Care & Early Learning Facilities Fund will help ensure that we get this right.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on this issue. We are ready to help in any way we can and look forward to working with the General Assembly, the Rhode Island Department of Education, General Treasurer Seth Magaziner, and other partners to ensure that all students attend school in high-quality school buildings.

We urge you to support Article 5, Question 1 (the School Construction Bond) and Article 9.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.