



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: House Bill 5076, Article 7 Relating to Education & Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, FY2025 Supplemental and FY2026 Budgets

Senate Committee on Finance

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Paige Parks, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Over the years, Rhode Island has taken several steps to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality education they need to succeed in **school, career, and life**. In 2010, the General Assembly enacted the state's first education funding formula which was based on five key principles – equity, adequacy, predictability, accountability, and efficiency. We thank the General Assembly leadership and the Finance Committee for all your hard work to establish the funding formula through legislation, to ensure that it is fully funded, and to seek improvements to the formula to better meet the needs of Rhode Island students.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for a key element of Article 7 of H-5076 -- the proposal to increase the student success factor from 40% to 43% to better meet the needs of students in low-income families who live in Rhode Island communities with the highest concentration of poverty.

Meeting the Education Needs of Low-Income Students

On average, low-income students have lower levels of academic achievement than their peers, a gap that has not narrowed in the past 50 years, and when poverty is concentrated in a school -- that is, when a high percentage (50-60% or more) of students in a school come from low-income households -- the impact on performance is compounded. In response, according to FutureEd at the Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy, 41 states have policies that specify additional dollars for students living in poverty and 22 provide additional funding for districts with concentrated poverty.

Rhode Island's education funding formula includes two essential elements that support students in low-income families and communities.

1. The education funding formula provides a core amount of funding per student, and for low-income students a **student success factor** currently equal to 40% of this core amount is added, recognizing that it costs more to educate a high-need student from a low-income family.
2. The funding that comes from the state versus the local community is based on **local fiscal capacity (i.e., the property tax base) and concentrated poverty**, so the state share is higher in low-income communities.

Children in poverty are more likely to attend schools that lack resources and have fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. **Article 7** modifies the education aid funding formula by increasing the student success factor from 40% to 43% for those districts with a pre-kindergarten through 6th grade poverty density at or above 60% (as determined by state share ratio calculations). This modification will impact five districts in FY2026, including Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket, (as well as those charter and state schools with students from these districts.). **We greatly appreciate Governor's McKee's proposal to include \$10.7 million in the FY2026 to support this change.** We support this proposal, and in fact, we would recommend that the student success factor should be even higher, given the additional needs of low-income students and evidence from studies that show such students may require as much as 2-3 times more funding.

Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education FY2026 Budget:

We would like to thank the General Assembly for including funds in last year's budget to provide free school meals to children previously eligible for reduced-price meals. However, the proposed budget misses the opportunity to build on last year's downpayment. All children need access to free and healthy school meals. This is an investment that Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly support and is needed to fight hunger and ensure that children are ready to learn. Children cannot learn on an empty stomach. Children who are hungry are more likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems and are more likely to be tardy or absent from school, be suspended, and repeat a grade. **Providing school meals to all students will reduce stigma, improve equity, and ensure that food insecurity is not a barrier to academic participation and success.**

Additionally, **the proposed budget does not increase access to mental health support in schools** so schools can hire and retain school social workers. School social workers are often the primary mental health professionals for students and are accessible to students and their families, offering crucial support in identifying and starting interventions for students' mental health wellness. Untreated mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the youth justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk of suicide. **The School Social Work Association of America recommends a ratio of 250 students to one social worker.** Rhode Island is well over the recommended ratio.

We are grateful that last year's budget increased funding for Multilingual Learners and built this funding into the core funding formula. However, funds are still needed to ensure that Rhode Island has trained teachers and dual language programs needed to support these students.

We would like to thank the Governor for his continued investment for after school programming for the Learn365RI initiative that focuses on making education a 365-day per year endeavor, increasing access to out of school time (OST) programs. We also encourage the Committee to support the

Building Opportunities in Out Of School Time bill, which will increase access and provide professional development for OST professionals including Learn365RI providers.

Thank you for your hard work to ensure that our state's education funding formula meets the needs of Rhode Island students, and for continuing to invest in our state's children and their academic success. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today.