

To: House Education Committee

From: Frank Flynn, President

Date: March 13, 2024

Re: Standards for School Closures

Testimony in Support **H 7726** (Rep. Morales, et al.)



The Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals strongly supports House Bill 7726 sponsored by Representative Morales. This bill, if passed, would require specific actions and procedures that a public school district and the Rhode Island Department of Education would follow when proposing to phase out, merge, or close a public school.

Every school in Rhode Island has its own identity and culture. Often times, the school is the cornerstone of the neighborhood or community which it serves. In addition to their role as the center of learning, local schools provide a common public meeting space for civic, educational, social, recreational, and municipal activities.

School closures, mergers, or consolidations can be traumatic experiences for students, teachers, and communities. The loss of a school can destroy the fabric of an entire community.

Often, districts need to make the difficult decision to close, merge, or reorganize a school for a host of valid reasons. Issues such as health and safety, obsolete or inadequate infrastructure, and most commonly fiscal exigency are often the reasons cited.

There has been a lack of transparency or inclusion with respect to recent school closures. Both last year and this year, there has been an outcry of students, parents, teachers, and community members when schools in Providence under RIDE control, closed without any transparency or public input.

This bill will provide a set of clear standards which all Rhode Island school districts must follow when considering a closure, merger, or consolidation. The key elements of the bill include:

- Public notice prior to initiation of a closure, merger, or phase out.
- Posting on the districts website of information which includes a report regarding facility conditions, estimated repair costs, RICAS data, school report card and improvement plan, enrollment, and attendance data.
- A transition plan regarding enrollment and transportation options for displaced students, including students with IEP plans.
- A requirement for RIDE or the district to convene four meetings with staff, students, parents, and community members.

In our opinion, this bill will provide the necessary transparency and accommodations the students, parents, and staff are entitled to when a decision is made to close, merge, or consolidate a building.

We thank Representative Morales for his advocacy on this important legislation and we urge you to pass this bill.

Thank you for your consideration.