

To: House Committee on Education
From: Parents Leading for Educational Equity
Re: RELATING TO EDUCATION -- HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS H7726
Date: March 13, 2024

Dear Chairman McNamara and Members of the House Committee on Education,

My name is Ramona Santos Torres, I am the executive director of [Parents Leading for Educational Equity](https://pleeri.org) (PLEE). We are a grassroots, family advocacy organization fighting for equitable systems of care for families and children. On behalf of PLEE and the parents we represent, I want to express **support** for house bill H7726. Transparency and accountability serve as cornerstone principles essential for fostering fairness and justice within society. This legislation mandates a transparent and uniform process for school closures, mergers, or phase-outs, involving input from all stakeholders to ensure openness in decision-making.

In districts such as Providence Public Schools, the recent closure announcement of 360 High School in February 2024 has emphasized the urgent necessity for a transparent, accountable, and community-driven approach towards managing school closures. Providence Schools have struggled due to a lack of these procedures, resulting in very significant challenges for families, students, educators, and the broader community. H7726 presents a crucial framework by instituting clear and responsible guidelines for school closures, mergers, or phase-outs by involving parents, educators, and community members in the decision-making process.

Below are key points outlining the importance and provisions of H7726:

- **Transparency and Accountability:** H7726 mandates a clear and standardized process for decision-making regarding school closures. This ensures that all stakeholders, including parents, students, educators, and community members, are involved and have a voice in shaping the future of our schools.
- **Historical Harm of School Closures:** Communities of color have long suffered from the consequences of disproportionate school closures, which have deepened existing inequalities. The closure of schools in communities of color has not only disrupted access

to education but also severed vital connections to cultural identity and community resilience. It is incumbent upon us, advocates, policy makers, lawmakers, education leaders to confront this historical legacy with respect, humility, and a commitment to accountability.

- **Community Engagement:** H7726 requires public school districts and the Rhode Island Department of Education to involve stakeholders in the decision-making process regarding school closures, mergers, or phase-outs. It mandates public meetings where parents, educators, students, and community members can voice their concerns and provide input on proposed plans. This community-centered approach not only builds trust between school districts and the community but also ensures that closure decisions reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of the communities they serve.
- **Equitable Process:** H7726 mandates that detailed contingency plans be developed to address the educational needs of students affected by school closures, mergers, or phase-outs. Additionally, contingency plans outline specific measures to support students with individualized education plans (IEPs), 504 plans, or enrolled in special education, in compliance with federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act.

We recognize the substantial financial challenges confronting school districts across Rhode Island, including the impending ESSER funding cliff, declining enrollment, and inadequate school infrastructure. As a community, we understand the urgency of addressing these issues and acknowledge that difficult decisions lie ahead. Nonetheless, it is essential that the gravity of these circumstances does not overshadow the critical need for handling school closures with the utmost care, transparency, and consideration. **Process matters**, we firmly believe that an intentional, data-driven, and community-centered approach is paramount in making informed decisions that foster transparency and accountability. Our school communities deserve nothing less.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ramona Santos Torres
Executive Director