

Testimony of Warren Heyman, Organizing Director, Rhode Island School Recycling Project

Bill number House Bill No. 5422 entitled, An Act relating to education—School Waste and refuse disposal

March 4th 2025

My name is Warren Heyman and I am the Organizing Director of the Rhode Island School Recycling Project.

We are a non-profit funded with grants from the DEM, EPA, USDA and private foundations including 11th Hour Racing.

Our project, titled Get Food Smart Schools, is focused on helping school district implement the Food Waste Diversion law that House Bill No. 5422 is addressing. I am testifying in support of the proposed amendments to the law.

Our project is currently in 42 schools throughout our state from Woonsocket down to Newport and over to Chariho, North Kingstown. We are in 15 school districts plus 4 charter schools. We are currently meeting with people in 3 additional districts about launching our project in the Fall. We have a staff of 18 some of whom are paid and some of whom are volunteers.

As you know the Johnston Landfill will be full by 2046 and then we will have to pay to ship our trash out of state. Connecticut already does this and writes a check for \$93 million per year to truck their trash to Pennsylvania. This is both a tax issue and a climate change issue.

Our schools send 2500 tons of food waste to the landfill each and every year. Of that 388 tons is perfectly good, edible and healthy food....unopened milks, unpeeled bananas, oranges and apples, un-opened bags of carrots and yogurts. And we are throwing this good food into the trash while 30 to 40 % of the students in our schools are food insecure.

Our project, during the last three years has diverted 258 tons of food waste from the landfill and redirected 27.8 tons of healthy, edible food to food insecure students. That is the equivalent of 46,000 meals and it's a reduction of 205 MTCO₂ into the air.

We have been able to do this because of the original law you passed and because RIDE gave some districts Get the Foam Out grant money and other districts agreed to let us set-up the project with our grant money.

But there are many districts including large districts like Warwick, East Providence, Coventry, Bristol/Warren that are not in compliance with the law. All of the healthy, edible food in those towns is going from the kitchen to the students trays to the trash and then to continue to fill up our landfill.

And the food service companies are also not in compliance. They could be asking the food service workers to put the food waste they generate in the kitchens, into buckets and contract with Black Earth or Boot Strap or Re-Mix to haul the food waste and convert it into compost. The approximate cost of a 64 gallon tote to be picked up is \$20 to \$22 dollars a week. A high school kitchen would fill that tote once every two weeks so the cost to the food service company and district is about \$10 per week.

We reduce the amount of trash going to the dumpsters behind the schools by over 60%. If a district monitors the dumpsters closely, and I know North Providence is doing this, they should be able to reduce the number of pick-ups or the size of their dumpsters and garner savings which will off set the cost of this law.

Our project sets up sorting stations in the lunchroom which are staffed by student rangers and warriors. They assist the fellow student in sorting the trash to make sure healthy, edible food is not thrown away but instead refrigerated and shared with hungry students. Being in 42 schools thus far has allowed us to train over 3,000 students to be rangers and

warriors. This has expanded their knowledge and allowed them to learn leadership skills and gain confidence.

BUT the law needs to be strengthened. I have had conversations with Superintendents and Facilities Directors who are very excited to have the program but then ask what happens if they decide not to launch it. I tell them that the students continue to be hungry and we get closer to writing the \$93 million checks to ship our trash out of state but otherwise nothing happens.....and then they stop returning our calls.

RIDE's Get the Foam Out Program was a huge step forward to help a number of towns fund this effort but many towns did not apply to this program and therefore received no grant money. And I commend Caitlin Mandel and the RIDE team for having this program.

I would like to comment in specific on a few of the proposed corrections to the law.

Section 16-111-4 Food Service-Local sources preferred. Changing the language to go from Preferred to required makes the law have teeth. Barring a food service company from bidding on a district's food service business if they are not in compliance in other towns mirrors how the federal government handles contracts and grants. In fact, some federal

bids prohibit a company from bidding if they have not filed the reports required under other existing contracts.

Why should we give business to a company if they are not willing to follow the law? In some towns that we are working in the food service company is in compliance in the schools where the students are sorting the trash but not in compliance in the schools we have not been invited to work in.....even though composting the food waste in the back of the house kitchen would cost about \$10 a week.....

If there is no cost to violating the law, then the law will be ignored and our landfill will be full that much sooner and you will need to find the tax dollars to pay to ship our trash elsewhere.

Lastly I want to testify about the Certified Environmental Custodian component in these proposed additions to the law. Currently no one person is responsible to make sure every school is following the food waste, recycling and Styrofoam laws. As a result, many, many schools commingle their recycling with their trash and many schools and food service operators are not complying with the laws covering diverting edible healthy food and food waste. Lots of healthy, edible food is going into the trash and up to the landfill hastening the day we write checks for millions of dollars to ship our trash out of state.

The proposal to create a Certified Environmental Custodian will accomplish two laudable goals; First it will ensure that someone in each school is responsible and has the training

and authority to make sure that the schools and food service companies are following the laws that you write, debate and pass. And secondly it will create an additional career path for custodians. Custodians currently have two levels: a custodian and a lead custodian. That is not much of a career ladder and contributes to why Districts have a hard time filling the positions. I was in one district in September where I was told there are 16 unfilled custodial positions.

If you require the creation of a Certified Environmental Custodian, it will allow existing custodians to expand their knowledge and responsibility and make sure the Districts and food service companies comply with this important law. A certification program designed by the DEM and RIRRC would allow custodians to increase their knowledge and then apply that to ensuring our schools and food service companies comply with these laws. It is no different than a teacher getting a Masters degree. The greater the skills and knowledge of the people who work in our schools, the better the outcomes.

We support the proposed changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to answer any questions.