



March 17, 2025

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara, Chair

House Education Committee

Rhode Island State House

Providence, RI 02903

**RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 5597 – An Act Relating to Education -
Health & Safety of Pupils**

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we express our support for Bill Number 5597 which advances equitable access to high-quality education and ensures emergency safety in schools. Through the ACHIEVE UNITED initiative of our LIVE UNITED 2025 Strategic Plan, we are committed to ensuring that every child—regardless of background—has the resources, opportunities, and safe learning environments they need to succeed from early childhood through post-secondary education. Providing schools with the tools to respond to emergencies protects students, educators, and communities, and is an essential component of an equitable and effective education system.

United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) strongly supports this bill aimed at improving air quality in schools, which will directly benefit the health and well-being of students and staff. Poor indoor air quality, including high levels of particulate matter, carbon dioxide, and inadequate ventilation, has been linked to increased absenteeism, reduced cognitive function, and worsened respiratory conditions. According to the *Rhode Island Department of Health*, asthma rates among children in the state are higher than the national average, with approximately 14.6% of Rhode Island children affected. By setting air quality standards and implementing regular inspections and necessary upgrades to school HVAC systems, this bill ensures that students and staff are breathing cleaner air, which will improve overall health and educational outcomes.

Moreover, improving school air quality aligns with UWRI's commitment to addressing disparities in education and health. According to a 2023 report by the *Rhode Island Kids Count*, students in schools with

Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders

subpar environmental conditions are more likely to face health challenges that impact their learning. This bill, which mandates regular air quality assessments and the installation of MERV 13 filtration systems, will help mitigate these risks. Ensuring that all schools meet these air quality standards, especially in schools serving lower-income communities, will help create a healthier learning environment and reduce the burden of environmental health issues on vulnerable populations, in line with UWRI's mission to promote equitable access to opportunity for all Rhode Islanders.

Investing in education is an investment in Rhode Island's future. Bill Number 5597 will help ensure that all students—especially those in historically underserved communities—have the tools they need to thrive in school and beyond. By advancing equitable K-12 education policies, we can break cycles of poverty, creating a pathway to long-term success. We respectfully urge your support for this legislation to build a more just and prosperous Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Dana DeMaire

Community Impact & Education Policy Intern

United Way of Rhode Island