

April 23, 2025

Representative Joseph M. McNamara, Chair
House Committee on Education

RE: H5836 - An Act Relating to Education - Curriculum

Dear Chair McNamara and Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Caleigh Rockwal and I am a Social Studies teacher at Hope High School and an organizer with the Providence Caucus of Rank and File Educators. I am writing today as a citizen to express my support of the passage of Bill H5836.

I have been a classroom educator for six years, and my students are the most engaged when they are learning their history and when they see a direct connection between what they are learning and the worlds and communities that they live in. The unfortunate reality is that most classes in Rhode Island schools do not engage students in this kind of study. Curriculum is often rigid, scripted, and white-washed, denying students the opportunity to learn about their individual histories and how they impact the world around them. This lack of relevance - and not lack of skill or will - is a significant factor behind the test score and attendance crises that people love to gripe about today. Who wants to learn about something that is not for you?

As a Civics teacher, I consider myself lucky because my curriculum includes a student-led action project that allows students the freedom to study and take action on issues they see in their community. This autonomy inspires my students to refine important academic skills like research, argumentation, and public-speaking - the very things we want to develop in our students. My projects have been successful because I have been able to draw from trainings, resources, and the expertise of youth-led organizations in Rhode Island. Youth are the experts on what is relevant for them, and I appreciate that this bill calls on RIDE to make use of their expertise. We need more collaboration with the community in our schools and we need this explicit provision to ensure that such collaboration is central to bringing and keeping Ethnic Studies in Rhode Island.

Not only do students not want to learn about things that are not for them, they also do not want to learn from people who are not for them. I also appreciate that the bill encourages RIDE to develop more pathways to recruit and retain teachers of color. Students deserve expert educators who will be able to execute the Ethnic Studies class with fidelity, and doing so requires a deliberate effort from us to build schools that are more representative of our students. We need teachers who know our students' histories, languages, and cultures. And we, as adults, need to protect these teachers and give them the resources they need to feel safe, respected, and valued at school. By bringing more community members into our schools, we can make our schools feel more like a community.

This campaign has made it this far because of the hard work of the youth leaders in the OurSchoolsPVD coalition. Our young people are strong, committed, articulate critical-thinkers who are passionate about making their worlds better and who are unafraid to speak their truths. As a teacher, they are exactly who I want my students to grow into. If they, the students who already possess these skills, are telling us that they need Ethnic Studies to continue to grow, just imagine how many more voices and how many more leaders will be up here with us for the next fight, should this bill pass. Our youth are the experts - and if we are smart, we will listen to them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caleigh Rockwal', written in a cursive style.

Caleigh Rockwal