



## Organizational Testimony in Support of House Bill 5836



April 23, 2025

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara, Chair  
 House Education Committee  
 Rhode Island State House  
 82 Smith Street  
 Providence RI, 2023

Dear Chair McNamara and Honorable Members of the Committee,

On behalf of OurSchoolsPVD—which includes the Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE), Providence Student Union (PSU), Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM), Youth In Action, Young Voices, Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE), Rhode Island Center for Justice, and the Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE)—and several community supporters—including Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island, Providence City Council, Providence School Board, Providence Teachers Union, PVD CORE, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, and a leader of AS220—we are writing to express our strong support for **House Bill 5836**, which would require every high school to offer a yearlong Ethnic Studies course.

House Bill 5836 is unique because it was written in partnership with the very people who would be most impacted by its passage—Rhode Island high school students. In addition to creating a yearlong course studying the experiences of communities of color in Rhode Island and the United States, House Bill 5836 ensures that students will play a long-term leadership role in their own education. It establishes a student-led council, which

will include Rhode Island teachers and community-based organizations, to support Ethnic Studies curriculum development and implementation.

We define Ethnic Studies as a field of study that critically examines the pervasiveness of race and racism in all aspects of American society. It centers the history and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and other racialized groups in the United States. It also promotes critical thinking on the intersectionality of identities in relation to power, privilege, and oppression (definition from ARISE-led political education workshops). As part of a more comprehensive understanding of American history, House Bill 5836 specifically prioritizes the teaching of Native American and Indigenous history, Black and African American history, Asian American and Pacific Islander history, the Armenian Genocide, Arab American history, and Latin American history.

Nearly half of K-12 students enrolled in Rhode Island public schools are students of color, and that percentage skyrockets to 81% in Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.<sup>1</sup> In Providence Public Schools, students of color make up over 80% of the student body, while educators of color make up only 20% of the teacher workforce.<sup>2</sup> Bringing Ethnic Studies to Rhode Island schools is not only about creating Ethnic Studies courses, but also about building infrastructure for schools to better support and honor the experiences of students, teachers, and communities of color. In addition to making Ethnic Studies a core Social Studies credit and graduation requirement, House Bill 5836 encourages the development of diverse educator pipelines to support the delivery of Ethnic Studies.

Ethnic Studies fosters critical thinking skills, a deeper analysis of structures of power and race, and improved educational outcomes. Research conducted by ARISE Youth Leaders and Dr. Chanda Womack demonstrates that Ethnic Studies is a transformative intervention, increasing students' ability to identify racist systems, desire to learn, access to support systems, understanding of social issues, feelings of liberation, and understanding of the importance of diverse perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, an evaluation of the San Francisco Unified School District found that the enrollment of 9th grade students in Ethnic Studies improved academic success and postsecondary outcomes, "substantially [increasing] high school graduation, attendance, and the probability of enrolling in college."<sup>4</sup>

OurSchoolsPWD's "Our History, Our Schools, Our Future" campaign builds upon a long tradition of Rhode Island youth of color pushing for Ethnic Studies. In 2016, Providence Student Union's Ethnic Studies campaign led to the piloting of Ethnic Studies course in Providence. Since 2018, ARISE has led professional development for teachers in Providence Public Schools about Ethnic Studies and identity development. House Bill 5836 honors this legacy by encouraging school districts to partner with community-based organizations for teacher training and curriculum development and requiring a student-led civics project in each Ethnic Studies course.

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<sup>1</sup>Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (2024). *2024 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook*. Providence, RI: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. [https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/factbook2024\\_final-2.pdf](https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/factbook2024_final-2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Boardman, C. (2025, March 25). DOJ investigating Providence Schools, ride for alleged discrimination against teachers identifying as white. <https://www.abc6.com/doj-investigating-providence-schools-ride-for-alleged-discrimination-against-teachers-identifying-as-white/>

<sup>3</sup>Womack, C. (2024). *Improving BIPOC high school students engagement and participation in community organizing and grassroots advocacy through a co-created Ethnic Studies training series focus on identity development and exploration* (Publication No. 31144891) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Lowell] ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database.

<sup>4</sup>Bonilla, S., Dee, T.S., & Penner, E.K. (2021). Ethnic studies increases longer-run academic engagement and attainment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

We are proud to have introduced House Bill 5836 as the culmination of nearly a decade of youth-led calls for Ethnic Studies. Throughout our campaign, we have proven that both community stakeholders and elected officials are aligned in the belief that Ethnic Studies should be a priority in Rhode Island schools. We are grateful for the support of the Providence School Board, which unanimously passed a resolution supporting an Ethnic Studies requirement in Providence Public Schools last spring, and Providence City Council, which unanimously passed a resolution this month in support of House Bill 5836.

As an alliance working in partnership with education's primary stakeholder—students—we urge you to listen to the collective voices of youth, parents, teachers, community members, and elected officials and **support H5836**.

Co-Signed,

OurSchoolsPWD, comprised of the following organizations:

- Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE)
- Providence Student Union (PSU)
- Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM)
- Youth In Action
- Young Voices
- Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE)
- Rhode Island Center for Justice
- Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE)

Community Supporters:

- Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island
- Providence City Council
- Providence School Board
- Providence Teachers Union
- PVD CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators)
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
- Anjel Newmann, Co-Executive Director of AS220 and Providence School Board Vice President