



May 6th, 2025

The Honorable Joseph McNamara Chair

House Education Committee

Rhode Island State House

Providence, RI 02903

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 6271 – Relating to Education –
Student Access to Interscholastic Athletics, “The Vera Riley Act”

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we write in strong support of House Bill 671 – Student Access to Interscholastic Athletics. This legislation plays a vital role in advancing both academic success and student engagement. As part of our Achieve United initiative, a core pillar of our Live United 2025 Strategic Plan, we are committed to ensuring that every child—regardless of their background—has equitable access to the learning environments and support systems they need to thrive. That includes opportunities both inside and outside the classroom, such as participation in athletics, which are proven to promote student well-being, school connection, and long-term educational attainment.

House Bill 6271 is a key driver of youth development and community connection. According to the *Aspen Institute’s State of Play* report, only 24% of youth from low-income homes in the U.S. participate in sports, compared to 43% of youth from higher-income households. This disparity reflects barriers like school funding limitations, transportation issues, and limited availability of programs—particularly for students in charter, alternative, and independent schools. These gaps are compounded in Rhode Island, where many small or non-traditional schools lack the capacity to offer full athletic programs.

The Vera Riley Act takes an important step towards closing this access gap by allowing eligible middle school students to join public school sports teams when their own schools do not offer those opportunities. This ensures that a student’s access to sports is not determined by their zip code or school model removing one barrier to participation. Participation in athletics has been linked to higher school engagement, lower dropout rates, and stronger social-emotional development—particularly for girls and students of color who often face compounded exclusion. By promoting inclusive access to publicly supported programs, this legislation affirms Rhode Island’s commitment to fairness, youth well-being, and community-building.

While the Vera Riley Act marks a significant step toward educational equity by expanding access to interscholastic sports, questions remain around the logistics of implementation—particularly transportation. Many students who will benefit from this policy attend schools that may not be located near the public schools hosting athletic programs. Without a coordinated transportation plan, families may struggle to support consistent participation, especially those already facing financial or time constraints. To ensure the act’s full promise is realized, Rhode Island must consider creative, community-based transportation solutions to make equitable access truly achievable for all youth.

Investing in education is an investment in Rhode Island’s future. House Bill 6271 will help ensure that all students—especially those from communities that have been historically underserved and underfunded—have access to the out-of-school time programs, enrichment, and academic supports they need to succeed. By advancing K-12 education policies that meet students where they are and address barriers to learning, we can break cycles of poverty, close opportunity gaps, and create a pathway to long-term success for the next generation. We respectfully urge your support for this legislation to build a more connected, thriving, and prosperous Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Dana DeMaire

Community Impact & Education Policy Intern

United Way Rhode Island

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