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Bill: H7415 – RELATING TO EDUCATION -- ESTABLISHMENT OF CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Name: Rachel Palumbo

Role: Local Education Employee

Position: Opposition

Chair McNamara, First Vice Chair Noret, Second Vice Chair Kislak, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H7415 – RELATING TO EDUCATION -- ESTABLISHMENT OF CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS. My name is Rachel Palumbo and I have been studying and working in Providence, Rhode Island since 2020. I earned my Master's in Urban Education Policy from Brown University in 2021 and have remained deeply engaged in the state of education in our community since then. Today, I speak to you both as an employee of a local community-based organization and as an advocate for community voice, meaningful choice for families, and educational equity in Rhode Island.

For many families, charter schools help fill important gaps in the education system and offer parents who are simply trying to find the best possible educational experience for their children with options. The high demand for charter schools in Rhode Island reflects this need.

For years, families have been asked to wait while traditional public schools improve, without realistic, explicit plans for how that improvement can readily be achieved. It takes decades and sometimes generations for meaningful, systemic change to be actualized at scale. Children in classrooms right now don't have the time to wait for those plans to materialize or be carried out– they deserve better options **right now**, but this bill asks them to continue to wait.

And I think we should be honest about who is being asked to wait.

We are not asking families with wealth and resources who already have access to school choice through private schools, relocation, or other opportunities to wait. The families most often being asked to wait are Black and Brown families and those with fewer resources to move districts or pay for alternatives. For these families, **public school options like charter schools are one of the only ways to access other educational opportunities for their children.**

Current, school-aged children deserve access to expanded opportunities today, not decades or generations from now. **And there are community leaders, funders, and partners that are ready to expand opportunities for students right now.**

Like those at De La Comunidad Bilingual and the Greene School- two charter schools that were granted preliminary approval in January.

This bill includes a stipulation that retroactively overturns previously granted preliminary approvals back to July 1, 2025– charter expansions that were reached through a **fair and public process**. Approvals for De La Comunidad Bilingual and the Greene School followed established procedures, community input, and careful review by the education experts tasked with evaluating proposals. Reversing these approvals represents a **deeply troubling overreach of power** that not only 1) undermines the integrity of our public

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decision-making systems but 2) disenfranchises community voices– including hundreds of Brown and Black families (*many of whom are your constituents*)– that **asked for choice**.

De La Comunidad Bilingual is uniquely positioned to support multilingual learners, a rapidly growing population in Rhode Island and one of the most resource-intensive groups to serve in our education system. It is well known that Rhode Island’s public schools continue to face significant challenges supporting multilingual learners at the scale required. Because De La Comunidad Bilingual was explicitly designed to help meet this need and relieve pressure on districts already working hard to provide adequate language supports, **overturning its approval sends a message that even when communities develop thoughtful, targeted solutions for multilingual learners, those solutions can still be taken away– leaving the very students who need the most support waiting, yet again, and systems scrambling to respond adequately.**

Perhaps most concerning is that many of the legislators making these decisions are far removed from both the process that led to these approvals and the day-to-day realities of our education system; yet, *they are willing to override outcomes that reflect the expressed interests of their constituents*. Because legislators are not education experts, Rhode Island has established transparent public review processes and entrusted education leaders to carefully evaluate charter proposals. When decisions reached through those expert-led and community-informed processes are later overturned, **it sends a troubling signal that the expertise of those responsible for these determinations (and the voices of the communities who participated in good faith) are not truly valued.**

When families show up, participate, and follow the public process, they should be able to trust that those decisions will be respected. Retroactively reversing approvals undermines that trust and **weakens confidence in the integrity of our public decision-making.**

I respectfully urge the Committee to reconsider H7415, particularly the July 1, 2025 stipulation that retroactively rescinds previously granted approvals. Doing so is *essential* to protecting both educational opportunity *and the integrity of the public process*. Families across Rhode Island deserve transparent, stable decision-making and a *genuine* commitment to expanding high-quality educational opportunities, not just for those with the privilege to seek alternatives.

Ultimately, the question before us is simple: do the children in Rhode Island’s classrooms today deserve better options now, and do we trust the experts and communities who worked through the public process to provide them?

Sincerely,
Rachel Palumbo
Providence, RI