



March 9, 2026

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara, Chair
House Committee on Education
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF House Bill 7417 – THE SAVE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL LIBRARIES ACT

Chair McNamara and Members of the House Committee on Education:

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we strongly support House Bill 7417, the Save Rhode Island School Libraries Act. This legislation would ensure every public school has a dedicated school library space and access to a certified school librarian—strengthening literacy, information literacy, and student readiness for the modern learning environment.

United Way’s policy and advocacy work is guided by our strategic framework: Strong Families, Strong Nonprofits, Strong United Way. Under our Strong Families pillar, we advance policies that strengthen household stability and reduce barriers to opportunity. Ensuring students have consistent access to high-quality learning resources—like a well-supported library and a trained librarian—builds a stronger foundation for reading, academic achievement, and long-term success.

Rhode Island’s reading outcomes underscore the urgency of this investment. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT data show that in 2024, only 37.7% of third graders met expectations in reading on the RICAS assessment—down from 48.0% in 2019 and largely flat since 2022. (RI Kids Count, 2025). This persistent gap in early literacy is a warning sign for later academic performance and long-term opportunity. Strengthening school libraries and staffing them with certified librarians is a practical, evidence-informed strategy to expand access to reading materials, support literacy development, and promote equitable learning opportunities for students across districts.

S 7417 also recognizes that libraries are not simply rooms with books—they are instructional hubs that build core skills students need to succeed. The bill’s findings emphasize that school librarians play a key role in fostering a love of reading and teaching information literacy and digital citizenship, including navigating misinformation and responsibly using technology and emerging tools. In a time when students are expected to evaluate information sources, use digital tools safely, and develop strong research skills, ensuring consistent library access statewide is both timely and necessary.

United Way of Rhode Island respectfully urges your support for S 7417. Establishing dedicated school libraries and ensuring access to certified school librarians will strengthen literacy



outcomes, promote equitable access to learning resources, and advance family stability by supporting students' long-term educational and economic opportunity.

Sincerely,

Elijah McLean
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United Way of Rhode Island