

# AMERICAN EXCHANGE PROJECT

March 9, 2026

The Honorable Joseph McNamara  
Chairman, House Education Committee  
Rhode Island House of Representatives  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith Street, Room 135  
Providence, RI 02903  
Sent via email to Lisa Cataldi, Committee Clerk: HouseEducation@rilegislature.gov

## RE: American Exchange Project Constituent Comments in support of 2026 - H7730

Dear Chair McNamara and Members of the Committee:

Thank you to the Committee and the General Assembly for considering **House Bill 2026 - H7730, an Act Relating to Education - Student Cultural Exchange Program**, and the significant opportunity it represents for Rhode Island's young adults and school districts.

American Exchange Project has seen firsthand how deeply impactful and transformative the **immersive cross-cultural domestic exchanges can be**. Enclosed, please find collected written testimony from our program alumni and participants in support of the proposed legislation, including comments from:

Teresa Akagi, Exchange Manager - West Jordan, Utah  
Carl Barnes, Exchange Manager - Croton-on-Hudson, New York  
Eric Bergman, Exchange Manager & Parent 2025 - Clinton, Connecticut  
Zakai Blackmon, Alum 2025 - Grants Pass, Oregon → Croton-on-Hudson, New York  
Arthur Boll, Host Family - Nashville, Tennessee  
Ariel Brouwer, Alum 2025 - Kingston, Massachusetts → Arvada, Colorado  
Alex Class, Alum 2024 - Albany, California → Dodge City, Kansas  
Josh Donaker, Alum 2022 - Palo Alto, California → Dillon Montana  
Olivia Haaland, Alum 2024 - Blue Earth, Minnesota → Kenner, Louisiana

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Steve Harper, Host Family - Cleveland, Ohio  
Connor Johan, Alum 2025 - Grants Pass, Oregon → Oak Cliff, Texas  
Kate Kramer, Host Family and Parent 2024 - Palo Alto, California  
Bekah Lejarde, Exchange Manager - Cleveland, Ohio  
Val Love, Exchange Manager - Kingsport, Tennessee  
Elizabeth LoVine, Alum 2025 - Grants Pass, Oregon  
Kory Loyola, Exchange Manager - Sussex, New Jersey  
Lois MacMillan, Exchange Manager - Grants Pass, Oregon  
Steven Maldondo, Alum 2024 - Scranton, Pennsylvania → Denver, Colorado  
Shelby Maring, Alum 2021 - Kilgore, Texas → Palo Alto, California  
Carter Martinez, Alum 2025 - Longview, Texas → Gloucester, Massachusetts  
Ken McCroskey, Parent 2022 - Albany, California  
Alexis Morib, Alum 2024 - Mission Montana → Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
Karma Norris, Alum 2025 - Arvada, Colorado → Kingsport, Tennessee  
Homar Olivarez, Advisor - Cotulla, Texas  
Norlan Orellana, Alum 2024 - Kenner, Louisiana → Dover-Foxcroft, Maine  
Molly Pennimpede, Alum 2024 - Gloucester, Massachusetts → Phoenix, Arizona  
Zulma Ramirez, Parent 2024 - Dallas, Texas  
Jessie Street, Exchange Manager - North Power, Oregon  
Aniya Thomas, Alum 2024 - Longview, Texas → Nashville, Tennessee  
Amy Thrush-Dreves, Host Family and Parent 2026 - Gettysburg, Pennsylvania  
Emma Vergo, Alum 2025 - Arvada, Colorado → Flowood, Mississippi  
Madison Vergo, Alum 2025 - Arvada, Colorado → Little Rock, Arkansas  
Caleb Wong, Alum 2023 - Palo Alto, California → Arvada, Colorado

Respectfully Submitted,



David McCullough, III

CEO & Cofounder, American Exchange Project

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"For the past two and a half years, I have had the incredible privilege of serving as the Exchange Manager for American Exchange Project in our community. What started as a program to help students experience life in a different part of the country quickly became something much more meaningful—both for them and for me.

Each year, I have watched students step into the unknown with excitement and nervous anticipation, only to return home transformed—more confident, more independent, and more understanding of the world around them. This program has opened doors to friendships that never would have existed otherwise, connecting students from completely different backgrounds in an atmosphere of mutual respect and curiosity. It has been inspiring to watch them challenge assumptions, embrace differences, and find common ground in ways that textbooks could never teach.

One of the most powerful aspects of American Exchange Project is the warmth and generosity of host families. Time and again, I've seen individuals open their hearts and homes, not just offering a place to sleep but treating these students like their own. The kindness and hospitality they extend remind me how good people are—and how much we all crave connection.

The joy of this program isn't just in the grand moments, but in the simple ones: the late-night conversations between new friends, the shared meals filled with laughter, the realization that people who once seemed so different are actually so similar. I have seen students return home with broadened perspectives, a renewed sense of self, and a deeper appreciation for their own communities.

On a personal level, this role has enriched my life in ways I never expected. Seeing firsthand the courage, kindness, and growth within these students has deepened my own belief in the power of human connection. American Exchange Project is not just an exchange of locations—it's an exchange of ideas, experiences, and hearts.

For anyone considering participation—whether as a student, a host, or a supporter—this program is life-changing. It has the power to shape futures, to foster lifelong friendships, and to remind us all that despite our differences, we all belong." *-Teresa Akagi, Exchange Manager - West Jordan, Utah*

"I first heard about American Exchange Project from my favorite weekly show: CBS Sunday Morning News. When I heard about it, I knew immediately that I wanted to be involved, because I had been thinking about doing a similar project on an annual basis—rather than a two-week opportunity, as

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part of a gap year program, much like the one that Maryland Governor Wes Moore signed into legislation his first day in office.

I have been involved with American Exchange Project since October 2023 at my hometown Croton-Harmon High School in Croton-on Hudson, NY. I have had students from various backgrounds come out to join us on our very first American Exchange Project. Students with disabilities, students that do not have the money to travel like this, as well as student athletes and leaders in Student Congress, Model UN, and other extracurricular activities and clubs...the appeal is universal!

We are finding out things that we did not know about our own home town and some of the people that make up our town as we prepare to host students from around the US for our Hometown Week.

I have had the opportunity to meet over 70 other educators/Exchange Managers at an American Exchange Project national conference in Salt Lake City in February 2025. It was inspiring to meet other educators that share this common cause that are willing to mentor new teachers like me and share their American Exchange Project stories from their communities from over 60 other U.S. communities.

I am finding out about over 10 other communities that my students will be traveling to this summer, from large cities like Las Vegas and Nashville to much smaller towns like Arvada, Colorado; Jackson, Georgia; and Galena, Illinois. The Exchange Managers in those towns share the same common mission in offering possibly the greatest gift we could offer a young adult...TRAVEL.

I learned at the age of 24 about the gift of travel, when I backpacked through Europe for 6 months. I am thankful for the gift of travel that American Exchange Project is able to offer my students in such a formative stage of their life. People ARE GOOD at heart! I am so happy that my students are being given this opportunity to see this for themselves and hope that the state of Oregon will be one of the first states in our country to make this difference to our students' lives." -*Carl Barnes, Exchange Manager - Croton-on-Hudson, New York*

"As an Exchange Manager for American Exchange Project, I have witnessed firsthand the profound excitement that comes from the opportunity to travel outside one's community. Currently, I have ten senior high school students who will be traveling this summer far outside their comfortable community of Clinton, Connecticut. What an opportunity!

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This program has not only motivated me to help students explore the country but has also reinforced my own belief in the power of new experiences to shape perspectives, broaden horizons, and foster understanding across diverse communities. My deep belief in experiential learning feels validated.

Guiding students through this journey has been deeply rewarding, as I've seen them challenge assumptions, embrace differences, and gain a greater appreciation for the richness of our country, even simply through our meetings and planning sessions. Yet the exchange doesn't just benefit them—it has also expanded my own perspective, reminding me of the value of curiosity, adaptability, and open-mindedness. Perhaps most meaningfully, my son, who will be traveling to Alaska this summer, has had the opportunity to truly look forward to an adventure—a true adventure. So I've seen the program's transformative potential on a personal level.

American Exchange Project is more than just a program—it's a catalyst for growth, connection, and lifelong learning. I am proud to be part of this mission and look forward to continuing to help students discover the country and themselves along the way." *-Eric Bergman, Exchange Manager & Parent 2025 - Clinton, Connecticut*

"I am writing to you about my experiences this year that relates to the proposed bill. American Exchange Project has a massively positive impact on students who are transitioning from high school into adulthood. By joining, students are introduced to important members of their community, their state, and the country. It also allows them to meet other students who share opposing views to them, in an effort to bring back the keyword 'united' in the United States of America. By bringing the bill to the floor and voting on it, high school students could make a big impact on the future of this country and give a healthy push to young adults who are joining the rest of the world." *-Zakai Blackmon, Alum 2025 - Grants Pass, Oregon → Croton-on-Hudson, New York*

"My wife and I hosted three boys visiting Nashville on American Exchange Project—two were from Texas and one from Arizona. The boys had many 'new' experiences (including simple things like being on an airplane or fishing) and developed a very large circle of new friends that they made interacting with boys and girls from all over the country as well as children from host families in Nashville.

We also hosted a departure supper where we had almost fifty people—host families, their American Exchange Project guests, and local students who were going to other cities in the next couple of weeks. The whole group spent a great evening together and my wife and I had a chance to spend

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time with other host parents. We all appreciated the opportunity to meet lots of people from different parts of the country and meet the next generation of our great country.

Great program—found out about it watching ‘Sunday with Willie Geist!’

It has my support and absolute recommendation!” -*Arthur Boll, Host Family - Nashville, Tennessee*

"Going into American Exchange Project, I had not been someone who had the privilege of traveling much, and I had never traveled that far before. When I arrived in Colorado, I wasn't expecting it to be any different from my hometown in Massachusetts. I was very wrong. Seeing the beautiful environment in Colorado left me dumbfounded. Even more than the scenery, the differences in the people gave me a new perspective on life.

Mary and Dave, my host family, were wonderful to me and taught me so much about Colorado's culture. Barbara, the Exchange Manager, was the perfect person to lead the program, making sure we experienced all that Colorado has to offer. It was one of the best experiences I have ever had, and I hope more and more people get the opportunity to see how beautiful it truly is." -*Ariel Brouwer, Alum 2025 - Kingston, Massachusetts → Arvada, Colorado*

"American Exchange Project, for me at least, achieved exactly what it set out to do: increase empathy and friendly ties between different parts of our country, by getting me to get out of my comfort zone both hosting and travelling to meet other young adults from outside my hometown.

When a gaggle of students from all four corners of the US showed up to our little hometown of Albany, CA, it forced me to step back and analyze my hometown as an outsider. The home team had to play tour guide – us hosts planned out a bulk of the itinerary, which was focused on showing as much of the Bay as we could to our guests, given our limited time together. Things I'd taken for granted – our slew of Tibetan restaurants, our local spice shop, or our proximity to UC Berkeley, for instance – were completely foreign to our new guests, and as such were things we absolutely had to show them.

I found myself having to explain what, until then, had been features of my hometown I'd never really critically thought about before; I found myself giving impromptu lectures on the history of immigration in the Bay, the Farm-to-Table Movement, and what it's like living in the shadow of a large university.

Talking to the students from out-of-town also forced me to re-analyze some much more serious topics – for instance, how it's almost assumed everyone at my high school is going to college, while

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it's almost the opposite for some of these students – or how faith and religion mean so much to these students, in stark contrast with our comparatively atheistic high school.

Of course, we also talked about politics – which was very surprising! Though I doubt we changed each other's minds on anything politics-wise, it was very constructive to be able to talk to someone around my age with polar opposite beliefs to me. I learned a lot about their point of view (and how much we both still agree on). It was also very nice to see them enjoying San Francisco, a city that gets a lot of bad rep nationally. I think that being able to see it in person – even with its many flaws – they were able to get over at least some of the fear and misconceptions they carried about the city.

I also had a ton of fun trekking across the Bay myself, going to places I hadn't been since I was a little kid. My friend Sydney worked at the restaurant of a local yacht club, and used her connections to get us some sailboat rides out into the Bay. It was really heartwarming to hear how it was many kids' first time being on water – or even seeing the ocean! I think it was those little moments that really reinforced my hometown pride. I think the freedom that being a just-graduated senior granted me helped me let loose a little and explore my hometown with my friends – just before we all moved away.

The other half of my experience in American Exchange Project was travelling to Dodge City, Kansas, a rural cattle town not unlike somewhere someone like Clark Kent would grow up. I was the only one from Albany on that trip, and I stayed in the family home of the main organizer for the trip.

It was an incredibly fascinating experience, to say the least. We did 'cowboy' things like ride horses, tour cattle lots (way more of an involved and technologically advanced industry than I'd thought!), and see imitation gunfights, but we also embarked on a lot of activities to help us understand what life was like for the local kids as well – like tour their high school, which was (by square footage) about four times bigger than mine, and find all the local hangout spots.

There was a degree of culture shock, to say the least. It was very weird living a much 'slower' life than you get in SF. I think the straw that broke the camel's back for me was when I discovered that the nearest bookstore was 80 miles away. It's a big difference from the university town I grew up in.

I think I learned the most from talking to the gaggle of host students who could make it; tellingly, many of them couldn't come some days because they were working. To put it bluntly, Dodge City is a lot poorer of a town than Albany – much like the kids who were visiting us in Albany, going to college (especially out of state) seemed to be the exception, not the norm. It was very sobering – and informative – to learn that one of the kids from Dodge was choosing to work at the meat packing plant like his dad instead of going to college.

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We also got taken to Church by our host families. I was perfectly happy to go, since it seemed novel to me (I'm Jewish). Honestly, it was quite a pleasant experience. It focused a lot on the music – which was played with drum sets and electric guitars, in contrast to my synagogue's choir / shofar / clarinet trio. It was also much more welcoming than I'd thought it would be – no one questioned why us newcomers were there, and the service was pretty charming and wholesome (not what I'd initially thought I'd be getting into, going to Church in deep rural Kansas). We got brunch afterwards – and, honestly, I can see why so much of the US is into that routine. It's a good time.

I became very close friends with the kids visiting Dodge in a very short span of time – now, I have friends in Arkansas, New York, Wyoming, Massachusetts, Alaska, Florida, and Texas. They were all very different but (as cliched as it is to say it) were in many ways still very much the same.

Overall, I'd say my time in Dodge taught me an incredible amount about a portion of the US I'd never have considered learning about on my own. When I hear about about cattle farmers, rural towns, or the Midwest, I now have a very strong reference point, one that I doubt any of my friends back in Albany share. And, to top it all off – it was fun!

I'm now going to school at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and it's been shockingly helpful to have those connections. I have invitations from friends in Wyoming and Kansas to come visit, and when we drive through the cattle fields of Colorado, I can't help but think back to my time in Dodge."  
*-Alex Class, Alum 2024 - Albany, California → Dodge City, Kansas*

"American Exchange Project was one of the most awesome and memorable experiences of my life.

Growing up in the suburban Bay Area, it was incredible to meet and share what life is like back home with senior students my age from all over the country. From eating In-N-Out by the Golden Gate Bridge to casual conversations while making s'mores by the beach campfire, every moment was special. It was fascinating to see how people's journeys after high school varied—some enlisting in the military, others attending trade school, and many pursuing four-year colleges. I also vividly remember a group member from Kansas seeing the ocean for the first time in his life.

I was then sent to Beaverhead County (Dillon), Montana, to experience a life vastly different from my own. I stayed on a horse training ranch 35 miles outside of town, surrounded by endless land and gorgeous mountains. I spent the week watching the rodeo, visiting Yellowstone, shooting fireworks for the first time, driving tractors, setting irrigation, riding horses, and playing fetch with herding dogs—fully immersing myself in a lifestyle unlike anything I had ever known in Silicon Valley. Many of my friends' parents back home were professors, software engineers, and white-collar professions, whereas many of the people I met on this trip were ranchers, horse trainers, and other blue-collar

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workers who help feed and sustain our country. This trip gave me a genuine appreciation and understanding of a vastly different American experience.

I still keep in touch with friends from both the California and Montana portions of the trip. I genuinely can't endorse this program enough—the impact it had on me and the potential it holds for students to see a different side of their country is just amazing." *-Josh Donaker, Alum 2022 - Palo Alto, California → Dillon, Montana*

"American Exchange Project was not just a fun trip, it was a life-changing adventure. From meeting friends to exploring new places, American Exchange Project was filled with new experiences. When I first arrived, I was greeted at the airport by my Exchange Manager Mr. Joseph, aka Jojo, and another group member, Andrew. We waited for the other two girls, Mira and Elisia, then headed back to the Airbnb. As we walked in we saw Gabe, Helena, Alyssa, and Anyla, the rest of American Exchange Project members. Immediately we all clicked; it felt as if we had all known each other for years. Through the whole trip, our group's bond became stronger and stronger, partially because we had such cool people, but also because we made sure we were all included. Nobody was singled out on activities or left behind, everyone had an opinion, and we all did something we could agree on. We spent the time in Louisiana trying new food, listening to music, and enjoying the new culture. Most days we had activities planned out, but Jojo always left room for flexibility. He always made sure we were doing something we wanted to do, not something he thought we should do, and I think it honestly made a big difference. Not only did it make the trip more fun, but it actually made us want to participate in the activities we were doing. I think this trip changed my view on life for the better. Not only did it help me learn that I need to venture out of Minnesota, but it showed me that I need to try new things. This trip gave me a different outlook on my life—not just how I'm living, but how different living is from state to state. If I could relive this trip in a heartbeat I totally would; it was the best decision I've ever made." *-Olivia Haaland, Alum 2024 - Blue Earth, Minnesota → Kenner, Louisiana*

"We hosted 4 students and loved it so much we're doing it again. It was so rewarding to hear how they were impacted during their time in Cleveland. They talked about experiences and relationships they'll never forget. Most were headed to amazing colleges and it was fun to dream with them about what lay ahead. My wife and I were moved the night before they flew out of town—they stayed up till 2am talking and then all woke up at 4am to say goodbye to the one who needed to fly out early. They also honored me on Father's day with a card, calling me their American Exchange Project dad and each other their American Exchange Project siblings—it was so sweet." *-Steve Harper, Host Family - Cleveland, Ohio*

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"American Exchange Project was an incredible experience for me. It influenced my life in an unbelievable way. I met so many incredible people in my class and in my community. ...During our journey to find host families, we met so many incredible people—people willing to help out and volunteer their homes and their time. Everybody I met through this program and through our Grants Pass community has been a positive influence on my life. This impacted my life so much and I believe that every high school student should go through this experience at one point or another. I think you should pass the bill so other kids can experience what I did." -Connor Johan, Alum 2025 - Grants Pass, Oregon → Oak cliff, Texas

"My friend asked me if I could host a student in the summer of 2023. We ended up hosting three wonderful teens...Their experiences of life were very different from that which I and my own teens had come to think was normal. One of the three had never ridden a bicycle, two had lived with their family in a car for sometime, and two had no plans for college. They all came to Palo Alto with preconceived notions of our wealthy town and spoiled families—and they weren't entirely wrong. Hearing their stories was eye-opening to my kids and me. My two teens began to see their own lives with new appreciation of the safety and opportunities that come with relative wealth. It was wonderful to watch my teens and the three students connect and become friends and realize that every life has its plusses and minuses, and that despite differences in house size, education, background, political leaning, religious beliefs, skin tone, gender, etc, people can connect, befriend and learn from one another.

American Exchange Project students, along with one of my teens and some other Palo Alto kids, all spent a night camping- a first for many. They all sat around campfires talking and sharing, and creating a community.

The next summer, 2024, my 18-year-old teen went to Kansas City, Missouri, through American Exchange Project. They traipsed through fields, went to a rodeo, lived with a politically conservative family, and proudly discussed why they were using the 'they' pronoun. And by the end of the week, they, too, all came to a place of understanding and connection, forming community and growing through American Exchange Project.

American Exchange Project not only created a space for my family to grow, but also allows teens from all over the country to connect and learn that people are more than their stereotypes—something our country sorely needs right now." -Kate Kramer, Host Family and Parent 2024 - Palo Alto, California

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"American Exchange Project was the most impactful week of my seven-year teaching career. My week in Cleveland with four visiting students and seven John Marshall students was filled with an immense amount of joy, creativity, and community that all of us had been sorely craving. It can be stressful leading a group of students all across a city and yet I wasn't stressed all week. I was having an absolute blast because I was a part of the joy, community, and discovery. I'm truly so overwhelmed by the positivity of this experience that I have to break it down into different categories:

The Educator's Experience - American Exchange Project gave me the opportunity to give my students experiences that I always want to offer but struggle to bring to fruition because of the daily constraints of the classroom and testing.

Students Discovering their Home - All of my Cleveland students were amazed by the resources, activities, restaurants, and opportunities for connection offered in their very own city. Every time they remarked in wonder that 'I didn't know we had this,' I would say 'this is your city!'

Visitors Loving Cleveland - Our visiting students absolutely loved Cleveland. From a student from Mississippi going on her very first hike in Cuyahoga Valley National Park to a student from Riggins, Idaho saying, 'I kind of want to live in Cleveland!', it was amazing to see the excitement for our city.

Friendship + Vulnerability - Above, all the friendships created during that week were so special. A remarkable student who is a refugee from Sudan taught all of her new friends how to make traditional sambosas in my parents' kitchen. This is the magic that can happen when young people of so many different backgrounds come together to cook, laugh, and play together." *-Bekah Lejarde, Exchange Manager - Cleveland, Ohio*

"As an Exchange Manager for American Exchange Project, my role goes far beyond simply coordinating logistics and matching students with host communities. It's about creating a life-changing experience for both the students and the communities they visit, while fostering understanding and connections that will last far beyond the week-long trip.

American Exchange Project is truly unique in how it brings together students from across the country, each from vastly different backgrounds and hometowns, to learn from one another in an immersive, hands-on way. The program's mission to 'stitch our country together, one student, one high school, one hometown at a time' has been a guiding principle throughout my work, reminding me every day of the powerful impact of this experience.

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Each year, I have the privilege of seeing how this exchange shapes the lives of young people. When students first come to the program, they often carry preconceived notions about life in other parts of the country—some of them based on stereotypes, others influenced by what they've seen on TV or heard from friends. Their communities may be small or large, urban or rural, but they all share the same curiosity and excitement about venturing into an unfamiliar part of the country.

From the moment the students embark on their journey, my job is to ensure they are prepared, supported, and empowered to fully embrace this adventure. I work closely with the students to ensure they understand the values of cultural exchange: open-mindedness, respect, and the willingness to step outside their comfort zones. Once they arrive in their host communities, my role shifts to a support system, making sure both the students and host families feel confident and connected. I'm always available to answer questions, provide guidance, or resolve any issues that may arise. It's important to ensure everyone feels safe, welcome, and engaged.

One of the most remarkable parts of this program is witnessing the personal growth of these students. Over the course of the week, I see them step into new environments, make connections with people they might have never met otherwise, and begin to understand that, despite the differences in our regions, we are all part of the same country. The program fosters a sense of shared humanity that often transcends any initial discomfort or uncertainty.

I remember one particular exchange where a student from a small, conservative town in the Midwest was paired with a group of students from a diverse urban area. Initially, there was hesitation on both sides—both groups had little understanding of the other's way of life. But as the week unfolded, I saw walls come down. Through shared experiences—working on community service projects, attending local school events, and simply spending time with one another—both sides began to learn from each other. It wasn't just about seeing different parts of the country; it was about breaking down barriers and realizing that no matter where we come from, we all have common goals: to grow, to connect, and to contribute to something larger than ourselves.

Once the week in the host community ends, the students return to their own hometowns, where they will now have the opportunity to share their experiences with others. As part of the program, they also welcome a group of students from a different part of the country into their own communities, further deepening the connections that were made. Watching students host their peers in their own towns is incredibly rewarding. Many of the students come to see their own communities through a new lens, appreciating what they once took for granted. They see their hometowns not as static places, but as dynamic spaces filled with opportunities for connection, growth, and understanding.

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The best part of my job, however, is witnessing the lasting impact of these exchanges. It's not just the week spent in a different community that matters—it's the relationships and understanding that persist long after the trip is over. Many of the students stay in touch with their host families and new friends, and they become more engaged in their local communities, having seen firsthand how different perspectives can enrich their lives.

At its core, American Exchange Project is about building empathy and creating a more unified country. And as an Exchange Manager, I'm proud to be a part of that. Every student, every high school, and every hometown involved is contributing to a collective effort to stitch our nation together in a way that celebrates both our differences and our shared values. And it's all 100% free—ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to experience this life-changing journey.

Seeing young people transform through this program is what keeps me motivated. Watching them return home with broadened perspectives, a new sense of belonging, and a deeper understanding of our country reminds me of the power of human connection—and the importance of continuing to stitch our country together, one student, one high school, and one hometown at a time." *-Val Love, Exchange Manager - Kingsport, Tennessee*

"There is a bill in your education committee that is related to what I am experiencing in Grants Pass, Oregon as a senior at Grants Pass High School. American Exchange Project has allowed me to become more involved in my community and its culture. I did not experience my childhood in Grants Pass, but have lived here for the last seven years and have never had the opportunity to be involved with the community. Since joining American Exchange Project, I have met long-standing members of the community through being a host family ambassador and met several at our celebration party as well. It has been amazing getting the opportunity to meet members of the town with such impact and being able to involve myself in something so meaningful. Our country divides farther every day and this program is allowing us to come together. During our weekly meetings, I have been able to interact with peers I typically wouldn't simply due to our views. I have been able to open my mind and learn to love all kinds of people, no matter what we believe in, and American Exchange Project stands for that. The bill would encourage more students to experience the greatness in their community." *-Elizabeth LoVine, Alum 2025 - Grants Pass, Oregon*

"At the start of this school year, the mother of one of my students mentioned that she was reading *The Anxious Generation* and that the book referenced a program, American Exchange Project, she thought would be of interest to me. I had taught her daughter for three years, and in all of the

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classes I had with her, we engaged in community-building exercises designed to improve students' ability to communicate with and understand each other. These activities included speed-friending, identity mapping, and the Better Arguments Project, in addition to the required curriculum. I saw the positive effects these activities had on my students and the relationships they developed, so I was completely open to trying something new that would help me achieve my goals. Little did I know, this 'new thing' would be an extensive and life-changing experience.

After meeting with the kind-hearted people at American Exchange Project, I decided to bring this program to my students and my community, High Point Regional High School. Admittedly, it was difficult to get it off the ground. I struggled to get seniors to commit to traveling before heading off to college, convince their parents to allow them to go, and find good host families for the students to stay with. However, American Exchange Project team, especially Aislinn, guided me through the process, helping me turn potential host families into committed ones. American Exchange Project folks are some of the kindest, yet most efficient, people I have ever worked with. They get things done, but are always welcoming, never making me feel like my questions are silly.

American Exchange Project Conference in Salt Lake City was not only helpful to me as an exchange manager, but it also made me a better educator and a better person. Empathy is fostered at every step of this journey. This was truly one of the most important professional development endeavors of my 26-year career.

Earlier this month, my students found out where they will be going on their American Exchange Project adventure. While I cannot yet speak to the richness of their experiences, as they have yet to travel, I am confident that this program will give my students everything I hope for them: an ability to learn from others, a greater sense of empathy, a renewed appreciation for their community, a desire to reciprocate a rich experience, and the ability to travel far beyond our small town. Ours is not a place where people are particularly well-traveled or worldly, and most families do not have the financial means for leisure travel. Unfortunately, there is also little tradition of engaging in exchange programs. The American Exchange Project has exceeded every expectation I had, and I cannot wait to see how it helps nurture my students into becoming more understanding, empathetic, adventurous, and experienced adults." *-Kory Loyola, Exchange Manager - Sussex, New Jersey*

"I am writing to you regarding the proposed bill. I have had the opportunity to pilot American Exchange Project with twenty Grants Pass High School seniors. Grants Pass is a Title One school with 100% Free and Reduced Lunch designation, and the vast number of my students never travel beyond Josephine County before they graduate from high school. To bridge the divide between rural and urban communities, American Exchange Project gave my rural kids the opportunity to travel

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offering two weeks of adventure to my graduating seniors. One week, Oregon seniors welcome twenty seniors from other states around the country to experience Grants Pass and Oregon culture. When planning the week, there is a required service project for each day, so we will be cleaning up at least two state and federal parks in our area. The second week, my students travel for free to another state to learn about the uniqueness of their town and state. It must be understood that this is NOT 'a travel for free' program. It is so much more! After thirty-five years in the classroom and serving on many commissions in Grants Pass for more than three decades, I am stunned on what opportunity has opened not only for my students, but for the genuine civic engagement results in our community.

This legislation can not only enhance the education of graduating seniors, but electrify the local community, resulting in genuine civic engagement with different generations within each community. When my twenty GPHS seniors reached out to service organizations to recruit host families, they started to get involved in those service organizations such as Rotary Club. There are four Rotary Clubs in Josephine County and groups of American Exchange Project seniors were assigned to visit and present why we welcomed students from around the country. What happened is the students were exposed to people that had retired and still wanted service the youth. From a retired thoracic surgeon from the Bay Area, to a Navy officer who served in eight embassies, to a Rhode scholar who taught at Cornell, to a Grants Pass city councilman, my students have fostered friendships with people that want to continue to give and serve. I can preach about how civic engagement is essential to maintain our great democracy, but the bill can ensure that students apply their learning to communities and become productive citizens in the future.

Sincerely,

Lois MacMillan

Grants Pass High School, American History, World History, AP Government Teacher" *-Lois MacMillan, Exchange Manager - Grants Pass, Oregon*

"American Exchange Project has impacted my life in so many ways that I could think of. First, it helped me get out of my comfort zone and get to know and explore new things, such as people, cultures, different kind of buildings I'd never even heard of, and so much more! Secondly, I've made connections to wonderful people that I still talk to today! That's how close we all got in one week. I'm actually planning real soon to visit my friend who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico! Third, this program has made me realize that we're all humans, no matter what race, culture, or religion we are. We all can get along and have a great time. I thank my past self for taking a risk and not regretting it

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because no risk, no story. Thank you, American Exchange Project." -*Steven Maldondo, Alum 2024 - Scranton, Pennsylvania → Denver, Colorado*

"American Exchange Project was such an important and powerful experience that opened my eyes to how big the world is. Only knowing and surrounding myself with people from other rural communities, I was never exposed to the life of students from the city (in this case Palo Alto). It made me interested and passionate about education equality, and made me feel proud of my hometown when I was previously ashamed to be from what I thought of as a close-minded community. There were so many things from my hometown that I didn't know I appreciated until I was taken out of that world. It also inspired me to be around such passionate and smart students. It pushed me to dream bigger than before, and really helped set the tone for my college years. I have since referenced many of the amazing and important conversations in essays, class, or even interviews because it made such an impact on me. I hope everyone can experience this!" -*Shelby Maring, Alum 2021 - Kilgore, Texas → Palo Alto, California*

"From the start to me leaving I was given a great experience...I started with hosting people in Texas and being able to hear their stories and exchange pieces of their heritage and their home. But the real adventure started when I went to Gloucester Massachusetts and met my group. From the moment I landed, I could tell that it was gonna be fun. Everyone had arrived at the house and we started talking about who we were and where we were from. The first introduction was kinda awkward and [we] struggled. Then finally we got to go to the houses we were staying at and meet our hosts. During that week, I stayed with these people and got to know them better. I learned that every household had different circumstances and was run in completely different but almost the same ways. For me, I got to experience different food and ways of living. I had plenty of meals I hadn't heard of or had before. Also...everyone was in and out of the house but still had their family moments throughout the week. Then there are the people that traveled down to Massachusetts with me from different states as well. Seeing how everyone lives in a different lifestyle according to where they live but that everyone had similar viewpoints, and being able to openly express thoughts with these people, felt so rejuvenating. This program allowed me to open up to new people and be able to understand different living styles better, and the friendships I made I will be keeping for a long time." -*Carter Martinez, Alum 2025 - Longview, Texas → Gloucester, Massachusetts*

"Our daughter benefited greatly from both hosting students from other states and staying with a family in Little Rock, Arkansas. Despite having traveled somewhat with family, the exposures she had

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were broadening in ways that will stay with her for a long time. We live in an affluent, San Francisco Bay Area semi-urban neighborhood where our kids get around by walking and bicycling. Most go to four-year colleges, and few have a car to drive. Program visitors here included folks from extremely rural areas and those who expected to enter the workforce after high school. Her visit to Little Rock was a window to the South and lifestyles, weather, and history she hadn't even imagined. She was challenged with history, religion, and physical activities that she never would have undertaken otherwise. Through it all, she made connections with other kids and observed just how differently other Americans live, how their expectations are so different, and yet how much we all have in common. We support all kids having access to American Exchange Project. In some ways, our country's future depends on connections across our divides that American Exchange Project seeks to foster." -Ken McCroskey, Parent 2022 - Albany, California

"I was told about American Exchange Project my senior year and had no idea what it was, despite our school doing it the year before. I was skeptical at first because I'm not a super extroverted person and I usually like to stay home. However, I really wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone. I had never been on a plane before and had only been out of the state a few times in my life so I was really nervous specifically about that. When I was told that I would be going to Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, I was even more nervous because of how far it was, but I was determined to follow this through. When I got there, at first, I was homesick. But soon enough, I was too busy to even worry about that. My host mom was also the Exchange Manager for the school in Bryn Mawr. She played a big part in making my time there comfortable and fun. I'm not very talkative, but both my host parent and the kids there encouraged me to come out of my comfort zone and make friends. This experience really impacted me as a person. I think it's important for everyone to meet and spend time with people that may not have the same beliefs or cultures as you. It helped me to better understand that even if we are each our own person and have our own lives, if we can all just have an open mind, we can all make lifelong connections and create lifelong memories to look back on." -Alexis Morib, Alum 2024 - Mission Montana → Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

"When I was offered this program I was so excited to possibly go on a free trip around my own state and another. I originally signed up for American Exchange Project for the trip itself. This may sound selfish, but the people were secondary to me. However, the moment I met the people I would be spending the next week with, every activity we had planned flew to the back of my mind. This program pushed me out of my comfort zone. I had only been to an airport twice in my life before this experience, and never alone. I had never been terribly good at making friends with people quickly, but it forced me into meeting some truly amazing people (and getting to know the ones I went to

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school with better than I had) that I will never ever forget. When I was given a photo of all of us together and we all passed it around to sign it, it felt as though I had spent the last four years with them and this was our last time signing each other's yearbooks. (That photo sits directly across from my bed.)

I know this will sound cheesy, but I will forever adore this program. It gave me a wonderful view of my own state from the eyes of people who had never been here before. And it allowed me to get over my own fears and insecurities. I can confidently say that this program not only made me a more joyful person, but it also made me far more confident in my ability to talk to new people and make friends.

The last thing I will say to plead with you to allow high school students to continue doing American Exchange Project is that this spring break I will be getting the first of two tattoos I have planned to commemorate the people I met and the unforgettable experience we had together. I'm getting a lady bug with 19 spots for the Colorado portion of my trip, not only because lady bugs are good luck, but I also saw oh so many on that trip. I'm also getting an anklet of 9 fireflies to commemorate my Tennessee trip as I have only ever seen a firefly in Tennessee and they symbolize love. Thank you so much for reading my story and even more for helping high school kids become more social and well-traveled before we truly enter the 'real world'." *-Karma Norris, Alumn 2025 - Arvada, Colorado → Kingsport, Tennessee*

"My story is a bit unique in that I was one part in the many of the inspirational parts that motivated David to start this great organization. I was part of the group David met on his first ever trip to Cotulla, Texas, when he embarked on his summer long journey across America while he was studying at Yale. Like any good Texan, we embraced him with open arms while poking fun at him for being a Northerner, and then we showed him what life in South Texas was like.

As any good trip does, it came to an end, but we had all gained a new friend, because at the end of the day, we are all Americans, even if our upbringings are different. Me and my buddy Hornet later that year had some time to kill, so we decided it was time to see the Big Apple and visit some friends we had there and pay homage to a recently departed friend. While planning the trip, we realized that New Haven was only a short train ride away and we told David we'd be stopping by for a visit to see what Yale was all about, much to his astonishment. He could not fathom that we believed New Haven or him to be that interesting.

That trip was memorable as we immersed ourselves into David's world at Yale and got to spend some time with a former Cotulleno turned Yale professor.

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Fast forward a few years; my brother and I had some time to kill and we took a Big Apple trip just for fun. David was back in the Boston area this time and we booked a secondary trip to visit him and his folks. Again David was taken by surprise that we'd think him that cool to warrant a trip away from New York, but once again we got to see the Boston area from a local's perspective.

The takeaway was experiencing these trips from a local's perspective. David came down to see us, we showed him what makes us South Texans and then we in turn visited him to see what made him a Northerner, Bostonite...you get the point. We discovered, or should I say, reaffirmed, that we are united together as Americans and are not all that different from each other. Sure, I could visit Boston anytime and check off visiting museums and restaurants, but what have I really learned of the people living there now? David is now a lifelong friend, a brother, someone I would drive half-way across the country if he needed help, and when I turn on the news, watch a Reel, or hear of something associated with Boston or Yale, there's a special connection and a knowledge of the culture that lives there. They are no longer just Northerners.

It was not long after that David would tell us of his plan for American Exchange Project and the vision he had for it.

It's an awesome program that seeks to replicate in part what we experienced. So that the West Coast doesn't feel that far away from the East Coast. So that everyone gets an early opportunity in their lives to travel in their own country. I did not get to do this until I was in my 30s. Life is about becoming a well-rounded individual, you cannot do that by living in a bubble... It's like being able to be Anthony Bourdain in No Reservations, but at 17 years old." *-Homar Olivarez, Advisor - Cotulla, Texas*

"Hi! I'm Norlan and I'm writing about my experience with American Exchange Project. It was a honor to be part of this experience and I don't think words can be enough to explain how nice this experience was and how much I learned from it. I met people, places, and food. But most importantly, thanks to this experience, I was able to feel new feelings like happiness and excitement. I really can't describe how good and necessary this experience was. It helped me to learn more about myself and the type of person I want to be. I wish other people could feel the same way I did. Thanks so much again!" *-Norlan Orellana, Alum 2024 - Kenner, Louisiana → Dover-Foxcroft, Maine*

"American Exchange Project has changed my view on life. I signed up for it as a free trip not knowing how it was going to end up being. I was from Gloucester, Massachusetts, and I traveled to Phoenix, Arizona. I fell in love. It had everything my small town didn't have: deserts, cactus, and the Grand

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Canyon. I didn't realize how different the world was and this trip changed my view on the world and the country. When I got back to Gloucester a couple weeks later, we hosted. I loved it. I was able to meet people that had never seen the ocean or been on a boat. It was so cool seeing and learning about people that hadn't experienced that life like I had ever since I was little. Throughout both my trip and hosting, I learned about and met so many different people. I made lifelong friendships that I will hold close forever. I love everything about American Exchange Project and wish I could do it again. I hope that in the future, anyone from any school can sign up and experience a trip of their life like I did by traveling with American Exchange Project." -Molly Pennimpede, Alum 2024 - Gloucester, Massachusetts → Phoenix, Arizona

"American Exchange Project has had a profound impact on my son's life, offering him an opportunity to explore a new state, meet new people, and make lasting friendships. His experience has truly been like no other. Although I missed him dearly, I couldn't bring myself to take him away from the incredible adventures he was having—the new foods, the vibrant towns, and the invaluable learning experiences. When he returned home from Jackson, Georgia, he eagerly shared stories of his activities and the way he volunteered in his own town, helping other exchange students, it was clear that American Exchange Project had shaped him in ways I couldn't have imagined.

If this bill passes, it will have a lasting positive impact on our country and generations of students to come. American Exchange Project has been rewarding not just for me as a parent, but for all the students who have participated in it, as well as for the teachers and host families who go above and beyond. They drive the students to activities, feed them, and provide a home away from home. I am truly grateful for the opportunity my son had, and I can only imagine the joy and growth future students will experience. This program truly enriches lives, and I hope it continues to thrive for years to come." -Zulma Ramirez, Parent 2024 - Dallas, Texas

"The people behind American Exchange Project are some of the most kind, interesting, fun, genuine and adventurous people I have ever met. They are so dedicated to getting to know people in an authentic way and celebrate their stories. This is our pilot year for the program at our school and the excitement has been building by the day. I have noticed a significant increase in engagement and school pride in the seniors who are participating. They're so excited for their trips—just eyes full of stars. And they are really invested in showing strangers just how amazing the outdoors of Eastern Oregon are. We all can't wait to teach friends to fish, to chop wood and set up camp, to ride a horse...the list goes on. We know we will be creating lasting and impactful memories while making friends from far-flung places. I cannot emphasize how important this experience is for rural

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communities like mine in Eastern Oregonians, who often feel very disconnected and oppositional to the Western side of the state. This program can help to break these barriers and show us how to listen to each other and hold space for our differences." *-Jessie Street, Exchange Manager - North Power, Oregon*

"It was a wonderful experience! My location to visit was Nashville, Tennessee! The flight scheduling went smoothly; pick-up from the airport went smoothly as well. My Exchange Manager and the entire American Exchange Project team did a wonderful job making sure that we were comfortable at all times, and that we [students] and our parents knew what was going on at all times. The host families were very friendly and made us feel apart of their families. I learned how different my life was from the students that lived in Nashville. I learned the culture and the history, and we even participated in local activities to get a feel of how it is to live in Nashville. My trip opened my eyes to broader aspects of life. My mom and I were slightly scared for me to travel without her being by my side. But the feeling of freedom as a young adult exploring somewhere that I've never been before, with a group of people I'd only been talking to online [before the trip], felt so amazing and I felt that I could do anything that I put my mind to. Even the people I lived with! My friends had gluten allergies, dairy allergies, lactose intolerance, etc. and it helped me get a feel for how their life is—how they have to carefully pick which restaurants they can eat at instead of having multiple options, or even have to double-check that their milk alternative is correct. Seeing how different someone's life is from mine was a very eye-opening experience. American Exchange Project has given me some lifelong friends and memories for years to come!" *-Aniya Thomas, Alumn 2024 - Longview, Texas → Nashville, Tennessee*

"I am a host parent and teacher who assisted the Exchange Manager and often went on the trips as a chaperone, so my perspective and view is broad in that I knew some outgoing students as students. This brief American Exchange Project week made an impact in the lives of many traveling. Some of these students came from tough backgrounds and some were privileged. One was orphaned at a young age, another was on the autism spectrum, and more than half had never been on an airplane ever and shared stories of how they were scared to travel alone, but grateful to have been given this opportunity to learn about a different part of the world and meet new people. I watched one boy who aspires to be a lawyer take on a variety of leadership roles, whether it was helping to carpool inbound students to where they needed to be to finding ways to making an apprehensive kid feel respected and included in an activity. I observed city kids celebrate nature in their first-time camping experience. The boy who expressed the most fear over getting killed by a bear and staying somewhere with no electricity and no lights ended up being that kid who was

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fascinated with building a campfire where we could cook. He said he was returning home with 'survival skills.' I watched a tough girl shed tears while attending a talk by a Gettysburg battlefield guide in disbelief over how bloody the battle was. She admitted later that she almost backed out of the trip because she thought she'd be bored with where she was selected to travel to. The trip broke barriers and built bridges. One girl shared that her mom warned her that 'Pennsylvanians were probably either Amish or into farming,' but her daughter was pleasantly surprised by all of the different personalities and admitted that it is not good to stereotype. A girl who had a fear of bugs and animals was placed with a host sister who studied entomology and had many pets. They had some interesting conversations and concerns before the trip, but by the end of the trip, the inbound girl said she loved getting to know the personalities of the chickens and was amazed with the rainbow of eggs they laid! I watched picky eaters try new food. Our shy girl took the lead when we got to visit the African American Museum in D.C. She told us all of the exhibits she wanted to pack into our schedule. I watched hardcore Republicans and Democrats debate over politics, shed light on their hometown experiences, agree, disagree, but still stay buddies during teambuilding activities, or while swimming, hiking, and roller skating. The kids all helped out at a homeless shelter, and the staff couldn't get over their eagerness to organize toys in the playroom and help haul items from a storage area to be put to use in various locations. Amelie learned a lesson while weeding about the invasive species of spotted lantern flies. American Exchange Project was an action-packed week full of adventures, experiences, and friendships that made an impact for a lifetime." -Amy Thrush-Dreves, Host Family and Parent 2026 - Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

I had a wonderful time with American Exchange Project. I got to go to Mississippi and meet some wonderful people. A week in a state I never really thought I would enjoy visiting turned into one of my most memorable weeks. The other students I met, as well as my host family and Exchange Manager, made the whole week super fun. We learned so much history and formed connections throughout the week. Immediately after my week in Mississippi, I got to come back and head straight into my Hometown Week. I participated in all the hometown activities and was able to get to know even more amazing people as this was an even bigger group than in Mississippi. It felt so good giving them a good experience in Colorado and getting to be a part of that. My family wasn't really planning on doing a senior trip, and so this wonderful opportunity for free travel really made the summer after my senior year so special. I learned so much and formed so many connections and I would do it again in a heartbeat. I know I've already told my underclassman friends they need to sign up when they get the chance. -Emma Vergo, Alum 2025 - Arvada, Colorado → Flowood, Mississippi

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"American Exchange Project really made me get out of my comfort zone. I met so many new people and tried so many new things I'd never done before. I went whitewater rafting, which is something I'd never even considered doing before." -*Madison Vergo, Alum 2025 - Arvada, Colorado → Little Rock, Arkansas*

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me.

There were these two kids from Blue Earth, Minnesota, on my exchange. I'd never even heard of Blue Earth. I was coming from a more urban city with a graduating class of several hundred; their graduating class had 20 or 30. It was eye-opening.

I felt more open to exploring and seeing new parts of the United States after doing American Exchange Project. When I found out some other people from my exchange were going to South Dakota, I thought, 'That sounds cool, maybe I'll go there someday.'

It would be a mistake not to bring American Exchange Project to students. It was one of the best experiences of my life. American Exchange Project gives us the opportunity to have experiences that we'd never have otherwise. Without it, I'd probably be a lot more close-minded." -*Caleb Wong, Alum 2023 - Palo Alto, California → Arvada, Colorado*