



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ^{AFT}
AFL - CIO

To: House Education Committee

From: Maribeth Calabro, President

Date: March 10, 2026

Re: **Joint Resolution Creating a Special Joint Legislative Commission to Study Rhode Island's Method of Funding Charter Schools**

Testimony in Support of 2026-**H8131** (Edwards, et al.)

Maribeth K. Calabro

Chair and Members of the House Education Committee:

On behalf of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals (RIFTHP), I strongly urge you to support H8131, which establishes a special legislative commission to examine Rhode Island's method of funding charter schools.

Rhode Island's current charter school funding structure is not transparent, not equitable, and not sufficiently accountable to the taxpayers and communities that fund our public education system. As charter enrollment continues to grow, millions of dollars are being redirected out of local school districts each year—often with little public understanding of the real impact on district schools and the students who remain there.

When a student leaves a district public school for a charter school, thousands of dollars in per-pupil funding follow that student immediately. But the costs districts must carry—buildings, transportation systems, specialized staff, special education services, and student support programs—do not disappear when one or two students leave a classroom. The result is a structural funding imbalance that drains resources from district schools even as they continue to serve the majority of students and the highest-need populations.

The financial impacts are not theoretical. In Providence alone, the district pays approximately \$33.9 million annually in tuition to charter schools, even as it faces significant budget pressures and rising student needs. In some cases, the financial loss associated with a student transferring out of a district school can reach as much as \$18,840 per student, because the funding leaves immediately while the district's fixed costs remain.

Across Rhode Island, the effects are felt in multiple communities. Data presented by school districts has shown millions of dollars leaving local systems each year. Providence alone has lost more than \$6.8 million in special education-related costs associated with charter enrollment, while Central Falls has seen losses exceeding \$3.5 million, and districts like Cranston, Lincoln, and Cumberland have collectively lost hundreds of thousands more.

These are not abstract numbers. These are dollars that would otherwise support reading specialists, multilingual learner programs, special education services, mental health support, and classroom teachers in district schools.

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And yet, despite these growing financial impacts, Rhode Island lacks a transparent statewide analysis of how charter funding affects district stability, educational equity, and long-term fiscal sustainability.

Accountability must also be part of this conversation.

Charter schools receive public funds and are part of Rhode Island's education system. They should therefore be held to the same expectations for transparency, fiscal oversight, and educational standards as district public schools. But in several key areas, charter schools operate under a different set of rules.

One example involves educator certification requirements. District public schools must ensure that educators serving multilingual learners are appropriately credentialed and trained to meet those students' specialized needs. These requirements exist because multilingual learners require targeted instruction from properly prepared educators. Yet charter schools have significantly greater flexibility in staffing and certification pathways. As an example, according to the RI Dept. of Education website, less than five educators at Achievement First hold an MLL certification, yet the majority of teachers in Providence public schools has had to be certified in MLL to meet the ever-growing needs of our diverse population. Further, the number of high-cost differently abled students in charters is negligible and the result is a troubling double standard: district schools educating high-need students must meet strict certification requirements, while other publicly funded schools do not operate with the same expectations.

Equity demands consistency. Public dollars should come with consistent professional standards across all publicly funded schools.

Rhode Island can also look to Massachusetts for an example of how charter school funding policy can include meaningful safeguards for local school districts. Massachusetts law recognizes that rapid charter expansion can create serious financial disruption for district schools, and it therefore includes a structured reimbursement program to protect districts from sudden revenue losses. When a student transfers to a charter school, the sending district initially loses the associated tuition amount, but the state provides a multi-year reimbursement schedule designed to ease the fiscal shock. In Massachusetts, districts are reimbursed for a significant portion of the tuition increase in the first year and then receive declining reimbursements over several subsequent years as they adjust their budgets. This system acknowledges a fundamental reality: districts cannot instantly reduce fixed costs such as facilities, transportation systems, and staffing simply because a small number of students leave. By building reimbursement protections directly into statute and pairing them with clear financial reporting requirements, Massachusetts created a framework that balances charter school access with fiscal stability for district schools. Rhode Island currently lacks comparable protection, which is precisely why a comprehensive legislative review of our charter funding system is urgently needed.

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H8131 represents a necessary first step. This legislation does not predetermine an outcome. Instead, it acknowledges that Rhode Island needs a transparent, data-driven yearly review of a funding system that is increasingly opaque, financially disruptive for districts, and insufficiently accountable.

A legislative commission will allow educators, policymakers, financial experts, and community stakeholders to examine the real fiscal impacts of charter school funding and recommend policies that ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability across the entire public education system. As well as shedding light on the amount of Rhode Island dollars that leave our state and go to charter management fees, which is not even close to comparable to ordering pencils from WB Mason as was stated by a Charter Representative in her April 10th testimony last year.

Public education funding must serve all students! Rhode Islanders deserve confidence that their tax dollars are being allocated responsibly, equitably, and with full transparency.

For these reasons, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals strongly urges the committee to pass H8131.

Thank you for your consideration.

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