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Commissioner

State of Rhode Island
DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
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April 9, 2026

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

Dear Chair McNamara and members of the House Education Committee,

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) believes the future of Providence Public Schools (PPSD) belongs in the hands of the Providence community. RIDE also believes that this transition must be smooth and well supported.

The legislation currently before the Senate Education Committee, which mandates an immediate and abrupt return to local control, risks undoing years of documented structural transformation and the academic progress of PPSD students.

Rather than an immediate and total shift in governance, RIDE proposes a phased, progressive transition of PPSD from RIDE oversight to local oversight beginning July 1, 2026, with a completed transition of oversight from RIDE to PPSD by June 30, 2027.

This proposal is built on the concept of "gradual restoration," where the Providence School Board (PSB) would immediately begin to assume authority in some areas and have increasing decision-making authority over the course of a year, contingent upon the completion of key milestones. A collaborative, thoughtful transition of oversight will help ensure that the return of authority is not just a one-time hand-off of responsibility, but a durable and enduring transition predicated on stability and the continued progress of positive PPSD student outcomes.

The evidence is irrefutable: PPSD has significant momentum, and all metrics of operational health are moving in the right direction

- **Academic Gains:** PPSD is one of only 6 traditional LEAs in the state that now exceed their pre-pandemic 2019 results in both RICAS ELA and Math. Notably, in Math, PPSD has increased the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations every year since the pandemic, rising by 9.6 percentage points from 2019 to 2025. Additionally, Education Recovery Scorecard data (Harvard, Dartmouth, and Stanford) show that from 2022–2024, PPSD's learning recovery outpaced the state average, matched or exceeded many urban-ring and suburban LEAs, and outperformed comparable urban districts.
- **Rising Graduation Rates:** The 4-year cohort graduation rate has increased by 5.8 percentage points from 2019 to 2024. Crucially, the gap between PPSD and statewide graduation rates has been closed by more than half in that same timeframe. In addition, PPSD's 2024 4-year cohort graduation rate represents a 10-year high.

- **Advanced Placement Success:** We have seen a 10.5% increase in AP exams taken and a remarkable 30.0% increase in scores of 3, 4, or 5 compared to the prior year, demonstrating that more students are not only taking rigorous courses but succeeding in them. This is especially true for Hispanic/Latino students who have seen an 23.9% increase in exams taken and 53.3% increase in scores of 3 or higher.
- **Reduction in Chronic Absenteeism:** Chronic absenteeism has declined significantly from a high of 57.1% in SY 21/22 to 29.3% in SY 24/25. This 27.8 percentage point drop represents the highest percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism amongst any traditional LEA, and hundreds of thousands of additional hours of instruction for Providence's most vulnerable children.

The transition of oversight from RIDE to PPSD, would initiate a structured sequence of governance activities designed to transfer responsibility in a stable, manageable fashion.

As the district moves through the 2026-2027 academic year, and provided that established, mutually agreed upon, benchmarks for readiness are met, specific administrative and oversight authorities would be restored to the local School Board in phases.

RIDE's proposed transition will require sustained engagement and collaboration between PPSD, The City of Providence, the School Board, students, families, educators, and administrators. Working together, we must focus solely on what is best for students.

An immediate transition back to local control, before the District is prepared, risks undoing the academic progress that PPSD students are making. We've seen examples locally and across the country where an immediate return to local control resulted in significant "slippage" because the underlying systems were not yet mature enough to withstand a sudden change in governance.

This methodical approach ensures that the local governing body is fully equipped to sustain the district's momentum and assume full statutory responsibilities.

RIDE believes progressive transition is in the best interest of Providence's students, as it ensures continuity at a critical moment, it provides a safety net and will provide an ongoing framework for collaboration and growth, especially as it relates to student outcomes focused governance.

A thoughtful, phased return to local oversight is a strategy for the continuing the academic momentum of Providence students.

I urge the committee to consider a progressive transition back to local oversight to ensure that the academic progress that PPSD students are making continues.

Sincerely,

Drew Echelson

Deputy Commissioner
Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

CC: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Education
The Honorable Scott Slater
Lynne Urbani, Chief Policy Officer