

Subject: Support for S-2208 / H-7271: Strengthening UCAP for the Future

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Tom Ahern, and I am a supporter of the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program (UCAP).

I began working intimately with UCAP soon after its founding, helping this pioneering school during its first decade or so, with fundraising and other communications.

Be proud, Rhode Island. UCAP was a "charter school" *before* charter schools were fashionable. Thanks to UCAP, our state can legitimately claim to be a cradle of America's charter-school-type methodology (smaller classes, challenging—i.e., unborring—curriculum, more one-on-one teacher-time, etc.). It's another Rhody "first"—what Slater's mill was to the industrial revolution, UCAP has been for middle-school education in urban settings.

UCAP is one of a kind. In a professional career now approaching 4 decades, I've worked with countless schools, in every English-speaking country. Honest. I've never encountered a more compelling story than UCAP's. Trying out new ideas, new ways to teach. That school housed a tough audience: ultra-high-risk kids with no demonstrated interest in school. Their brains were fine, yet they were failing to thrive in the system.

Rhode Island can claim that story with pride before an admiring world. Consider the obstacles overcome:

- UCAP was always very exclusive. To get in, a new student had to be of middle-school+ age and already a notorious failure in the classroom. Turning around such students is baked into UCAP's reason for existence. And it is notably successful at that delicate, complex task, building good learning habits, forgiving but strict about things that matter. UCAP prepares unlikely people to ultimately graduate high school, that next big step toward launching a functioning adult, welcome in society and our economy.

- This, too: UCAP's founder, Rob Deblois, is a major RI education hero in many books. He was born to money (lucky, and he knew it). He had a swimming accident as a young man that left him in a wheelchair, paraplegic for the remainder of his 65-year lifespan (very *unlucky*). Yet Rob wanted to do something spectacularly good for the world...such as turn around young lives. The kids in UCAP were mid-adolescent, from all sorts of backgrounds, with one thing in common: an education off the tracks, going nowhere, headed for drop out. Very likely thereafter for them: no high school diploma, the basic ticket into any kind of decent job or the military.

From his wheelchair, Rob, founder and boss, deftly managed it all. He was recognized often for this achievement. He was the principal of UCAP until 2019 and passed away in 2020.

I respectfully urge your support of this important legislation, in Rob's memory. And thank you.

Sincerely,
Tom Ahern • Foster, RI