



RIPEC

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May 7, 2026

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara
Chairperson, House Committee on Education
Room 135
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re. Testimony on House Bill 8428 – Relating to Education – Establishment of Regional School Districts and House Resolution 8430 – Creating a Special Legislative Commission to Study and Provide Recommendations Relating to Shared Services Between Rhode Island School Districts

Dear Chairperson McNamara

I am writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) in support of House Bill 8428 and House Resolution 8430. House Bill 8428 would expand the state’s regional school district planning process by requiring consideration of shared services as well as regionalization. House Resolution 8430 would create a special legislative commission to study and provide recommendations relating to shared services between Rhode Island school districts.

Depicted in the figure on the following page, many Rhode Island school districts are relatively small, and declining enrollments are making them smaller still. Between FY 2020 and FY 2026, total Rhode Island public school enrollment fell by 7,635 students (5 percent), while enrollment in school districts declined by 12,637 students (10 percent). In many districts, including several of the state’s smallest, the decline has been far more pronounced. Four districts—Little Compton, Narragansett, South Kingstown, and Westerly—have seen declines exceeding 20 percent. In Little Compton and Narragansett, enrollment has fallen by at least 25 percent.

As a result, many districts are now notably small: 14 enroll fewer than 2,000 students, and six enroll fewer than 1,000. These trends are not expected to reverse. For example, in October 2026, Narragansett enrolled just 51 kindergarten students compared to 100 12th graders. Westerly enrolled 122 kindergarteners vs. 177 12th graders, while South Kingstown enrolled 128

kindergarteners vs. 183 12th graders.¹ Between 2004 and 2024, the number of babies born in Rhode Island annually fell by 18 percent.²

These trends exacerbate longstanding structural challenges. Rhode Island’s K–12 system has long struggled to achieve economies of scale, and continued enrollment declines are intensifying these challenges. Research suggests that districts can be both too small and too large to operate efficiently and effectively, with one review of peer-reviewed studies conducted between 2007 and 2018 finding that the most efficient district size generally falls between 1,500 and 3,000 students.³ A number of Rhode Island districts are already smaller than this range, with additional districts expected to shrink to below these levels in the next several years.

There are also indications that taxpayer dollars are not being deployed efficiently or effectively. Of the 50 states, Rhode Island ranked eighth highest in per pupil spending and sixth highest in terms of the ability of residents to pay (per \$1,000 of personal income) in FY 2023.⁴ Nevertheless, student outcomes in math and reading proficiency are middling.⁵

Beyond fiscal efficiency, the small size of districts raises concerns about educational opportunity. Smaller districts often struggle to provide comprehensive programming,

**Rhode Island Public School Enrollment
FY 2020 vs. FY 2026**

	March ADM		Change	
	FY 2020	FY 2026	#	%
Barrington	3,349	3,266	-83	-2%
Bristol-Warren	3,219	2,710	-509	-16%
Burrillville	2,290	1,992	-298	-13%
Central Falls	2,695	2,487	-208	-8%
Charlho	3,031	2,777	-254	-8%
Coventry	4,635	4,041	-594	-13%
Cranston	10,211	9,694	-517	-5%
Cumberland	4,654	4,764	110	2%
East Greenwich	2,527	2,470	-57	-2%
East Providence	5,113	4,966	-147	-3%
Exeter W. Greenwich	1,629	1,516	-113	-7%
Foster	256	231	-25	-10%
Foster-Glocester	1,140	1,012	-128	-11%
Glocester	525	560	35	7%
Jamestown	666	545	-121	-18%
Johnston	3,288	3,291	3	0%
Lincoln	3,098	3,225	127	4%
Little Compton	351	253	-98	-28%
Middletown	2,177	1,860	-317	-15%
Narragansett	1,232	919	-313	-25%
New Shoreham	132	121	-11	-8%
Newport	2,074	1,721	-353	-17%
North Kingstown	3,774	3,517	-257	-7%
North Providence	3,533	3,418	-115	-3%
North Smithfield	1,677	1,602	-75	-4%
Pawtucket	8,722	7,659	-1,063	-12%
Portsmouth	2,302	2,007	-295	-13%
Providence	23,047	19,209	-3,838	-17%
Scituate	1,288	1,165	-123	-10%
Smithfield	2,406	2,355	-51	-2%
South Kingstown	2,987	2,332	-655	-22%
Tiverton	1,763	1,580	-183	-10%
Warwick	8,775	7,926	-849	-10%
West Warwick	3,593	3,464	-129	-4%
Westerly	2,755	2,169	-586	-21%
Woonsocket	5,999	5,452	-547	-9%
<i>Distirct Total</i>	<i>130,913</i>	<i>118,276</i>	<i>-12,637</i>	<i>-10%</i>
Rhode Island Total	142,202	134,568	-7,634	-5%

Note: ADM means average daily membership
Source: RIDE, funding formula documents; RIPEC calculations

¹ RIDE, [Reports](#), October Enrollment.

² Rhode Island KIDS Count, [2026 Fact Book](#).

³ Connecticut State + School Finance Project, “[A Review of the Research on District & School Consolidation](#),” Feb. 2019.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, [2023 Annual Survey of School System Finances](#); RIPEC, [How Rhode Island Compares: State & Local Taxing & Spending](#), October, 2025.

⁵ On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, less than a third of 8th grade students showed proficiency in reading and only about a quarter were proficient in math. The Nation’s Report Card, [State Profiles, Rhode Island](#).

including Advanced Placement courses, specialized instruction, and extracurricular activities.⁶

Other states facing similar challenges, particularly those with rural or fragmented district structures like New York and Maine, have pursued shared services, regional collaboratives, and district consolidation to improve efficiency and expand student opportunities.⁷ Rhode Island, by contrast, does not face the same geographic or transportation constraints, yet has not systematically pursued these strategies. At the same time, the experiences of these states provide valuable models that Rhode Island could draw upon to make our K-12 system more efficient and effective.

While regionalization may ultimately prove to be the most effective long-term solution, there are a range of approaches worth evaluating, including shared administrative services, joint purchasing, and programmatic collaboration across districts. Given the state’s ongoing enrollment decline, these challenges will not abate—they will intensify.

For these reasons, we support House Bill 8428 and House Resolution 8430, which will require that these issues are studied in greater depth and that solutions are identified.

Sincerely,



Michael DiBiase
President & CEO
Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council

RIPEC is a nonpartisan and nonprofit public policy research organization dedicated to providing objective research and analysis that addresses the critical challenges surrounding public finance and economic opportunity in Rhode Island.

⁶ Connecticut State + School Finance Project, “[A Review of the Research on District & School Consolidation](#),” Feb. 2019.

⁷ Ciara Meyer, “[How Rural Schools Share Services and Try to Stay Relevant in These 2 States](#),” *Education Week*, Aug. 8, 2025.