

May 19, 2026
Representative Joseph McNamara
Chair, Education Committee
Rhode Island Statehouse
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 8531 - An Act Relating to Education – Compulsory Attendance

On behalf of ENRICHri, Rhode Island's largest secular homeschooling support group, we are writing to express our opposition to House Bill 8531 authorizing school committees to defer or deny approval of proposed at-home instruction in the cases of truancy, civil or criminal attendance charges, or concerns about the content or enforcement of the education plan.

ENRICHri is an inclusive, non-religious community that is committed to providing support and guidance for homeschool families in Rhode Island and protecting homeschool freedoms. We provide monthly public information sessions to all prospective homeschoolers and offer extensive support in guiding homeschoolers through the homeschooling process from both a legal (school district notification and reporting) and procedural perspective (such as choosing curriculum and providing instruction as well as finding social opportunities).

House Bill 8531 centers around the legitimate concern of truancy and chronic absenteeism that has been on the rise in Rhode Island and across the country. These are serious problems that deserve attention. However, H. 8531 rests on faulty assumptions and raises many legal concerns.

A February 2026 report issued by the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council found that most student absences are due to illness, vacations, lack of sleep, bullying and school climate concerns, caregiving responsibilities, and disengagement from school itself. Similarly, in Governor McKee's February 2025 kick-off of the state-wide Attendance Matters campaign, it was noted that the Providence Public School District achieved the steepest decline in chronic absenteeism by working "with families to provide support and address barriers that may affect attendance, such as transportation, housing instability, language or cultural obstacles, and mental and physical health concerns." These underlying issues are at the root of the current truancy problems, not lack of homeschool regulation.

We understand that the goal of H. 8531 is to address a specific issue of families using homeschooling as an avenue to evade truancy. However, under the current law, §§ 16-19-1 and 16-19-6 apply to all students and students already in truancy who are pulled from school can be kept under truancy oversight while homeschooling. We fully support this and advise any families who seek our guidance of this fact.

For this reason, it is unnecessary to enact H. 8531—there is an existing truancy framework and court procedures that should be used for this purpose rather than imposing new restrictions and unnecessary changes in processes on every homeschooling family.

As a state, Rhode Island has some of the strictest homeschool regulations in the nation. Homeschoolers are required to provide notification to their school district at the start of each school year, provide thorough and efficient instruction in the required subjects for a period of time equally substantial to public schools, and report attendance and progress at the end of each year. This balances the need for oversight with the constitutional rights of parents to homeschool.

H. 8531 would upend this process and the working procedures by:

- Replacing the current objective approval process with the authority to subjectively deny or defer a homeschooling request based on the belief that it is not “in the best interest of the child” or the caregiver lacks “capacity or competency.” This essentially leaves the homeschool approval process subject to the interpretation of Rhode Island’s 36 individual school committees who do not possess appropriate knowledge or expertise to evaluate homeschool approaches and philosophies.
- Instituting a mandatory waiting period, which could prevent families from homeschooling for more than a month while approval is pending. Courts in other states have recognized that forcing parents to keep children in public school pending approval is contrary to their constitutional rights.

Rhode Island’s vibrant homeschooling community are families exercising their constitutional rights to educate their children to meet their unique needs. H. 8531 institutes new restrictions that rely on subjective opinions, subjects children to waiting periods that impinge on these rights, and unfairly burdens the homeschool community as a whole for a problem that is not, at its core, a homeschooling issue. We urge you to oppose this bill and support the freedoms of homeschooling in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,
Melissa Robb
Director of State Homeschool Advocacy, ENRICHri