

To: Honorable Members of the House Education Committee
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

May 17, 2026

RE: Public Testimony for House Bill 8531 | Letter of Opposition

Dear Chairman McNamara and members of the committee,

As both a homeschooling parent in Rhode Island and longtime advocate for vulnerable individuals and families, I appreciate the importance of protecting children and ensuring that genuine cases of abuse, neglect, or educational harm do not go overlooked. I understand and respect the intent behind legislation seeking to create safeguards for children who may be at risk. However, I respectfully believe House Bill 8531 creates broad and subjective standards that could unintentionally burden law-abiding homeschooling families without clear evidence that Rhode Island's current homeschool laws are failing, which is why I'm respectfully requesting you oppose H 8531.

Rhode Island maintains an appropriately regulated homeschooling approval process, requiring homeschooling families to obtain approval from their local school district before beginning at-home instruction. Depending on the district, families may submit educational plans, maintain attendance records, provide instruction in required subjects, and comply with oversight requirements established under R.I. Gen. Laws §16-19-2. Additionally, existing child welfare laws already apply equally to homeschool families. Cases involving abuse, neglect, truancy, or educational deprivation can already be investigated and addressed through current legal and child protection systems. For that reason, I am concerned that this legislation risks creating additional scrutiny for families who are already complying with the law rather than narrowly targeting situations where documented harm exists.

For medically complex families like mine, homeschooling is often not simply an educational preference, but a necessary accommodation that allows children to maintain educational continuity while managing chronic illness, disability, mental health challenges, treatment schedules, sensory needs, or fluctuating medical conditions. Research involving children with chronic and medically complex conditions has consistently shown that continuity, stability, and individualized coordination of care and services are critically important to a child's overall wellbeing and development. A study published in BMC Health Services Research examining continuity of care for children with complex chronic health conditions found that families often face fragmented systems requiring parents to coordinate educational, medical, developmental, and support services simultaneously.¹ Additional research published in Continuity in Education noted that children with chronic illness frequently experience academic disruption, increased absenteeism, emotional stress, and barriers to educational progress when their educational needs are not flexibly supported.²

1. Miller AR, Condin CJ, McKellin WH, et al. "Continuity of care for children with complex chronic health conditions: parents' perspectives." BMC Health Services Research. 2009;9:242. doi:10.1186/1472-6963-9-242.
2. Harden C, Rea H, Buchanan-Perry I, et al. "A Multidisciplinary Educational Approach for Children With Chronic Illness: An Intervention Case Study." Continuity in Education. 2020;1(1). doi:10.5334/cie.2.

In my own experience, homeschooling has provided my son with educational continuity and stability during circumstances that would have made traditional educational participation significantly more difficult. It's also allowed for not only student-based learning opportunities, but real-time therapeutic interventions that he can integrate into his at-home learning environment; this same type of real-time intervention was not achievable through his 504 plan when he attended public school. When looking closely at H 8531 from the lens of a parent, educator, and caregiver for my son, I can see the unintended consequences this legislation would create for medically complex families.

Delays in approval, prolonged review processes, subjective evaluations of a parent's "capacity," or uncertainty regarding whether homeschooling will ultimately be permitted could disrupt a child's educational continuity during already vulnerable periods in their life. For a medically complex learner, even temporary disruption to educational placement or routine can carry significant consequences - physically, emotionally, and academically.

While I fully support appropriate intervention in situations involving genuine abuse, neglect, or even educational deprivation, a concept which is vastly subjective in definition, I respectfully believe any legislation impacting homeschooling should be narrowly tailored, clearly defined, and carefully constructed to avoid creating additional hardship for families already navigating complex medical or developmental challenges. As it stands, H 8531 relies on vague and subjective terminology.

Phrases such as "competency," "capacity," and "best interest of the child" can be found within this proposed legislation. These standards are not clearly defined within the bill itself and appear to leave significant room for interpretation by individual districts or decision-makers. In practice, this could result in inconsistent outcomes for families depending on where they live, who is evaluating their request and/or who is elected on the local school committee at the time.

Families should not have to prove they are "good enough" to homeschool, as such a practice is discriminatory, particularly for minority families or individuals from vulnerable, often stigmatized populations. If there is clear evidence of neglect or harm, Rhode Island has a robust child protection system in place to combat the safety concerns attempting to be addressed in this legislation. Unique learners and their parents should not have to endure any additional delays, uncertainty or procedural barriers to be approved for or to continue homeschooling, which is what could unintentionally take place if H 8531 moves forward.

While no educational model is perfect for every child, public policy should avoid broadly characterizing homeschool families through the lens of isolated cases. As someone who strongly supports child safety and community accountability, I believe legislation must be carefully tailored, evidence-based, and clearly defined. Safeguarding children and respecting responsible families should not be mutually exclusive goals.

I respectfully ask the committee to oppose House Bill 8531. Should you have specific questions, especially as it relates to our family's personal homeschooling journey as medically complex individuals, please feel free to reach out directly.

Respectfully submitted,
Shaina Smith
North Scituate, RI