



Testimony Re: House Bill 5976 Related to Building Opportunities for Out-of-School Time

House Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice our support for House Bill 5976 and thank Representative Mary Shallcross Smith for sponsoring and Representatives Fogarty, Hull, Serpa, Diaz, and Messier for co-sponsoring. This bill would provide \$4 million to support comprehensive and effective afterschool, school vacation, summer learning and workforce development programs for students in grades kindergarten through 12, provide professional development to employees of out-of-school time programs, and require an annual report to the General Assembly and the Governor on the status and progress of the programs.

High-quality, organized afterschool, summer, and out-of-school time programs improve the supervision and safety of youth, promote positive social skills, improve attendance and behavior, and, with sufficient dosage, improve student achievement. Quality out-of-school time programs provide engaging activities that are intentionally designed to promote youth development and are taught by trained, dedicated instructors who work effectively with youth. Youth who participate consistently can show improved competence, caring, and connections. **School hours only cover 20% of the time children and youth have available for learning, forming friendships, developing, and practicing skills, and exploring interests. What children do during out-of-school time matters for success in school and life.** Yet, there are not enough affordable, high-quality, out-of-school time programs to meet the needs of families and youth.

Currently, the state manages two systems to provide access to afterschool and summer programs. One of these systems is managed by the Rhode Island Department of Education to invest federal 21st Century Community Learning Center funds and served approximately 5,288 children and youth during the 2022-2023 school year and 1,577 children during the summer of 2022. The other system is managed by the Rhode Island Department of Human Services which provides childcare subsidies to school-age children to attend afterschool and summer programs.

In April 2023, Governor McKee announced a new out-of-school learning initiative, Learn365RI, designed to support partnerships between municipalities, school districts, and community-based organizations and improve student achievement, reduce chronic absenteeism, and increase FAFSA completion.

Access to OST programs remains deeply unequal in Rhode Island. Our state has the **largest gap in afterschool participation between low-income and higher-income youth in the nation. A national survey found that while 42% of mid-to-high-income youth participate in structured after-school programs, only 20% of low-income youth have the same opportunity**—a 22-percentage point gap, compared to the national average of 8 percentage points. Without proper investments, these disparities will persist, leaving the most vulnerable youth without the benefits these programs provide.

This bill will also support OST providers by investing in professional development. Providing professional development opportunities is essential for improving program quality, strengthening youth outcomes, and building a skilled, confident workforce. It helps staff deliver engaging, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate programming, and supports staff retention. Investing in professional development also creates leadership pathways and helps sustain the OST field long-term.

OST programs also support children's social-emotional health. At a time when youth mental health concerns are rising, investing in OST programs is not just about keeping kids busy, it's about keeping them safe, supported, and prepared for the future. Rhode Island must close the gap in access and ensure that all youth, regardless of income, have opportunities to learn and grow outside of school hours. We urge this committee to pass this important legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.