

Testimony in Support of HB 5982 - Support and Access to Bilingual Education

House Committee on Finance

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Hector G. Perez-Aponte, Racial Justice Policy Analyst, the Economic Progress Institute

The Economic Progress Institute supports Representative Felix's HB 5982, which would appropriate \$300,000 to establish a dual language program within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

All students deserve equal opportunities to learn regardless of language barriers. Currently, Rhode Island is underinvesting in its multilingual learners. A 2023 Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) study found that Rhode Island ranks 5th lowest out of 31 states in spending on multilingual learners. Although the RI General Assembly increased funding for multilingual learners in 2024, Rhode Island still severely lags behind its neighbors in Connecticut and Massachusetts. This is especially concerning considering that the multilingual learner population in RI has grown by 62.8 percent since 2015 and currently makes up 12.5 percent of the overall student population.¹ Additionally, approximately one in eight Rhode Islanders has migrated to the state from another country.

The solution is to increase funding for dual language programs that encourage students to engage with materials in two different languages. These programs embrace the culture of multilingual learners and encourage them to see their language skills as an asset. Dual language programs have been shown to improve English reading proficiency, decrease dropout rates, increase the likelihood of going to college, and improve economic outcomes for multilingual students.² These improvements will not only help RI students, they will also strengthen our workforce and economy.

Dual language programs also benefit students who speak English as a first language. In the US, bilingual employees are paid an average of 5 to 20 percent more than if they were monolingual.³ Ninety percent of US employers report a reliance on employees who know a language other than English. Multilingualism is a growing priority among employers; to ensure students have opportunities to succeed and Rhode Island has a strong workforce, we must invest in dual language programs and students.⁴

HB 5982 would also improve equity in Rhode Island by ensuring that all students have the opportunity to learn regardless of language barriers. Multilingual students are more likely to live in low-income households and attend high-poverty schools, so this bill would target and improve

¹ <https://ripec.org/2023-multilingual-learner-funding/>

² https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/multilingual-learners_fb2024.pdf

³ <https://workforceessentials.com/career-benefits-of-being-bilingual/#:~:text=Do%20jobs%20ever%20pay%20more,seeking%20the%20same%20bilingual%20employees.>

⁴ https://www.actfl.org/uploads/files/general/MakingLanguagesOurBusiness_FullReport.pdf

outcomes for historically marginalized communities.⁵ The Economic Progress Institute strongly urges passage of HB 5982.

⁵ <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/24677/promoting-the-educational-success-of-children-and-youth-learning-english>