



May 5, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney  
Chair, House Committee on Finance  
Rhode Island House of Representatives

RE: House Bill 6255

Dear Chairman Abney:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony expressing support for House Bill 6255.

Local governments and local communities are the foundation of American democracy. The public schools, in particular, provide the most accessible institution for Americans to participate in local democracy. However, over the past three decades, the residents of the city of Central Falls have not had the same rights as citizens in other cities and towns who are able to participate in the governance of their own schools. Since the early 1990s, the Central Falls public school system has been under state control. Throughout this time, the citizens of Central Falls have been disenfranchised and generations of students have not been afforded the same education opportunities as other communities in Rhode Island. House Bill 6255 will restore local governance of the Central Falls School District to the people of the city of Central Falls.

Over the past decade, I have been researching the history and consequences of state takeovers of local school districts throughout the United States, including the city of Central Falls. My research findings, based on historical analysis, hundreds of interviews of local and state leaders across the U.S., and data analysis of over 100 cities that have experienced state takeovers of their local government, show that:

- I. Takeovers are disproportionately experienced by communities of color
- II. Takeovers disenfranchise and disempower communities of color
- III. Takeovers do not meet the stated goals of state officials
- IV. Takeovers are anti-democratic and inconsistent with the American cherished principle of local democracy
- V. Takeovers are often justified on a belief that communities of color are incapable of governance

**I. Takeovers are disproportionately experienced by communities of color**

Since the 1980s, state governments have increasingly taken over local school districts. Most of these takeovers have occurred in cities with majority Black and Latino populations.

**II. Takeovers disenfranchise and disempower communities of color**

When states take over local school districts, there are various approaches to how they deal with school boards. In some instances, the locally elected school board remains intact. In other cases, the locally elected school board is abolished and replaced with a state-appointed board or not replaced at all. My research shows the abolishment of locally elected school boards is disproportionately experienced by communities of color. As a result, Black and Latino citizens in communities that experience takeovers lose their ability to elect the school board members and the policymakers that make decisions that directly affect them.

### **III. Takeovers do not meet the stated goals of state officials**

In each case of a state takeover, state officials and proponents of state takeovers have argued that the takeover will lead to improved outcomes. However, while state administrations promise that takeovers will lead to improvement, we have over 30 years of evidence that state takeovers do not meet the state's promised expectations. For instance, a 2021 study of state takeovers across the U.S. found that takeovers did not improve test scores, and in fact, might be associated with decreasing test scores.<sup>1</sup> While researchers have not been able to link state takeover of school districts to clear and consistent academic gains over time, the political and economic devastation for communities of color is clear.

### **IV. Takeovers are anti-democratic and inconsistent with the American cherished principle of local democracy**

In the U.S., we have a representative democracy, where citizens elect the individuals that will represent them in governmental bodies ranging from the local school board all the way to the White House. A basic assumption in our democratic system is that elected officials must be, to some degree, responsive to the citizens they represent or face the prospect of losing their elected seat. In other words, the threat of losing an election serves as a mechanism to ensure some level of accountability on the part of elected officials. However, in school districts like Central Falls, the decision-makers have not been accountable to the citizens they represent. This is inconsistent with the ideals of American democracy.

### **V. Takeovers are often justified on a belief that communities of color are incapable of governance**

Finally, my research has shown that in many instances, state officials build a case to justify a takeover on the grounds that local leaders were "were incapable" of governance. Questioning the merits and capacity of political leaders in communities of color has deep roots in American history, and has often been employed to undermine the legitimacy of people of color without merit.

The passage of House Bill 6255 will allow the citizens of Central Falls to govern their schools like most communities in Rhode Island. After three decades of state control of their local schools, it is time to restore democracy in Central Falls.

Thank you for considering my testimony. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [domingo.morel@nyu.edu](mailto:domingo.morel@nyu.edu).

Sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> Schueler, B. and Bleiberg, J. F. 2021. "Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.