



CITY OF CENTRAL FALLS
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Support Letter for House Bill 6255
Submitted to the House Committee on Finance
The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair
Rhode Island House of Representatives

Support letter for Senate Bill 1063
Submitted to the Senate Committee on Housing and Municipal Government
The Honorable Senator Jacob Bissaillon, Chair
Rhode Island Senate

Dear Chairman Abney, Chairman Bissaillon and members of the committees,

We write to urge your support of HB6255 and SB1063. As the leader of our city and the leader of our city's education strategy, we have devoted ourselves to a collaborative, rigorous and research-driven process over the last two years to arrive at the work represented in these bills.

As Mayor, I fully own my responsibility to do whatever is in my power to support the people of my community in improving their quality of life. I have focused on housing, and we're on track to produce more than 200 units of housing. We have tackled workforce development head-on, again in partnership with local and state leaders.

Even as we focus on growing the economy of our city, the number one factor impacting the families and future of my city is education.

We took time to listen and understand what teachers, families and students are experiencing, and to look at critical data from 34 years of state oversight, in order to deeply understand the challenges and strengths in our schools. Our report, published in the Fall of 2024, details findings from more than 700 interviews, observations in every school, and a comprehensive quantitative data collection effort.

Our families make daily sacrifices just so that their children receive an education that will lead to greater opportunities for them. We found that, in spite of many talented and hard-working teachers, families and young people, **our kids are not getting what they need to achieve that future.**

Over 50% of our students are multilingual learners. Only 50% of our MLLs in CF graduate from high school. Of the overall student population, only 65% graduate. We continue to have the lowest outcomes of any school district in the state, and those outcomes are worse for our MLLs and students with special needs.

We are a community that cares. If you have ever been to Central Falls, you know it is a place where people look out for one another, and especially for our children.

Following the report release, we gathered a remarkable coalition of caring and committed community leaders from across the schools, the city, labor, charters, families, teachers, and non-profit partners to help design an action plan – our community advisory board. We committed to healthy, honest disagreement, to ensure we didn't come to any fake agreements and that our relationships would emerge stronger from the process. We have a lot to accomplish together in the days and years ahead.

Ultimately, the group came to consensus on the need to return our schools to local control. They agreed on an innovative model for local governance that best matches our city *and* builds on lessons learned from across the state and country.

As with our other major city initiatives, we collaborated with all key partners to define a path forward in education. We are a unified coalition across the city and the Central Falls education sector who seek this change. District, labor, charters, youth advocates, families, and city leaders.

The Central Falls City Council passed a resolution on Monday, May 12, in support of this new governance model, and in support of the House and Senate bills before you. As a result of that vote, a proposed city charter amendment will go before the voters of Central Falls on July 8. The city ensured alignment with the timing of the state legislation so that, upon passage, we can ensure a smooth transition.

When the city referendum passes, the city will seat a locally accountable hybrid school board with 9 members, 5 appointed and 4 elected.

It's not your typical appointed or hybrid model. The community advisory board wanted to make sure that families, youth and educators are at the official decision-making table in our city. The 5 appointed seats are designated for a family member of a Central Falls student, a former educator, a CFHS alumnae, a current high school student and a community member. For the first three years of the transition, the community member seat will be designated by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education.

The 4 elected seats will ensure transparent, public and community-wide conversations about our education system in each election cycle.

We will have an odd-numbered board to avoid stalemates.

For the appointed seats, we will empower a diverse, representative nominating committee, so that appointees can vote their conscience and not feel beholden to a particular person or agenda.

The new CF school board's decisions will be shaped by those closest to our children. Research shows us that, while there is no silver bullet in education, keeping decision-making close to the children is one key to improved student outcomes.

With the help of our office, the city is prepared to ensure a smooth transition to this new model, including strong board orientation, and on-going training.

The other charge of the community advisory board was to ensure that any transition to local control is fiscally responsible. We will not hand off a future problem to a future Mayor. We will not set the city up for failure.

Due to low property tax valuations, high residential tax rates, low homeowner occupancy rates, and high poverty rates, the City lacks the fiscal capacity to fund a local share for education. In recognition of these circumstances, the General Assembly adopted the Central Falls Stabilization Fund (CFSF) in 2010, in conjunction with a new State funding formula.

The statutory purpose of the CFSF is to provide funding for “education aid calculated pursuant to § 16-7.2-3 [the “local share” of the core costs] and funding for costs outside the permanent foundation education-aid formula, including, but not limited to, transportation, facility maintenance, and retiree health benefits.” Despite this purpose, the statute did not mandate that the CFSF allocation be determined formulaically, leaving much to RIDE’s discretion. In practice, per RIDE’s finance office, the allocation to the CFSF has not been subject to *any* formal process or public documentation.

As a result, the annual allocation to the CFSF has not been appropriately reconciled with the district’s *actual* “costs outside the permanent foundation education-aid formula,” and the CFSF has been chronically underfunded relative to these non-core costs — which has driven CFSD to annually siphon funds from the core.

Indeed, in August 2024, RIDE’s Annual LEA Fiscal Accountability Report (for school year 2022-23) determined that CFSD was one of four districts that “do not cover the core instructional [amount] for their students”; that CFSD would need to spend an additional \$2.5 million to cover the core; and that the proportion of CFSD’s budget devoted to non-core expenditures was exactly the state average (23%), but that 71% of CFSD’s non-core expenditures were for “out-of-district tuition and transportation” (a percentage far higher than that of any district other than Jamestown) and only 19% were on building upkeep and maintenance (a percentage far lower than that of any district other than Jamestown).

Because CFSD has little to no control over the costs of out-of-district tuition and transportation (the portion of these costs dedicated to charter school tuition payments is in fact dictated by State law), substantially cutting non-core costs is not a reasonable course of action for CFSD. (*Note:* RIDE’s 2023 and 2022 Annual LEA Fiscal Accountability Reports determined that CFSD also underfunded the core in school years 2021-22 and 2020-21.)

In addition to the underfunding issue, the CFSF has fluctuated from year to year (ranging from \$7.0 million to \$11.1 million over the past five fiscal years), causing unpredictability at the state and district levels.

Recognizing the problems associated with the CFSF, Brown University’s Dr. Kenneth Wong, who played a key role in the development of the funding formula overall and the CFSF specifically, secured grant funding from the Annenberg Institute in 2024 to work with our Central Falls Office of Education Strategy team to study the issue and propose a statutory solution — an explicit, formula-driven approach to the CFSF allocation — to ensure that all students from Central Falls, whether in the traditional school district or in schools of choice, receive the fair and equitable funding that is their due. That solution is embedded in House Bill 6255 and Senate Bill 1063. Dr. Wong has also provided a letter of support for these bills.

These bills also mark the first city financial contribution to the schools in 34 years. The city has committed to direct any PILOT revenues from the Wyatt Detention Facility—currently the only detention center in RI excluded from the PILOT program—to support the public schools, all without adding costs to the state. The earmarking of these funds marks a significant city contribution

to the schools, as the city could otherwise dedicate the Wyatt PILOT revenue to other urgent municipal needs. This contribution is both fiscally responsible and also shows a true commitment by the city to begin the process of finding ways to financially contribute to our schools.

Our city is ready.

It has been 34 years.

Our children, our families, our teachers, our community stand together in our advocacy for these bills because we, the people of Central Falls, know it is time for change.

Support our city in taking responsibility for our own children and the people who care for them.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maria Rivera".

Maria Rivera

Mayor

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dr. Sarah Friedman".

Dr. Sarah Friedman

Director, Office of Education Strategy