

**Submitted by Francisco Gonzalez Perez, High School Advisor, Alumni - Onward We Learn
To the Rhode Island House Finance Committee**

Honorable Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Francisco Gonzalez Perez, and I submit this testimony with great pride as a lifelong resident of the City of Providence and a proud product of its public education system. I am writing in support of the “Onward We Learn Scholarship Act”, on behalf of *Onward We Learn*, an organization whose role in my educational and personal development has been pivotal and transformational.

I was born and raised in Providence, and my educational journey began at Hope High School. During my time there, the school was often colloquially referred to as “Hope for the Hopeless,” a nickname that reflected the low expectations many of us carried. I too once believed I would be among those for whom hope was lost. Over the four years of high school, I watched my peers’ mindsets shift—some positively, others not—and witnessed the dwindling number of students who ultimately walked across the graduation stage. Fewer still matriculated to postsecondary institutions.

My story took a different path, thanks in large part to Onward We Learn.

In 2020, I enrolled at Rhode Island College as a first-generation college student—the first in my family to attend and determined to be the first to graduate. Onward We Learn supported me every step of the way. From middle school, where I was made to feel seen and valued, to high school, where I received concrete tools and mentorship to pursue higher education, to postsecondary education, where I remained connected to a consistent and caring support system, the organization’s holistic approach made an enduring impact.

Crucially, Onward We Learn understands that academic potential can only be fully realized when students’ basic financial needs are met. As someone from a low-income background, financial stress loomed large in my pursuit of higher education. For my family, money was never a luxury—it was a necessity. The thought of attending college without financial aid would have been a devastating burden. Onward We Learn alleviated this concern by awarding scholarships based on both student participation and unmet financial need. That scholarship allowed me to begin college without the crushing weight of debt, enabling me to focus on my academics. I graduated in four years—debt-free—and without imposing a financial strain on my family.

The impact of this scholarship extended far beyond my own academic success. It empowered me to view myself as a role model for younger members of my family and my broader community. I saw firsthand what was possible with the right support, and I became determined to give back. In March 2025, I joined the Onward We Learn team as a high school advisor, bringing my journey full circle. The organization welcomed me back with open arms and continues to provide life-changing opportunities that shape my identity and my purpose.

The return on investment in a student supported by Onward We Learn is indisputable. I am living proof of what is possible when young people are given the resources, mentorship, and financial support they need to thrive.

I am deeply grateful to Onward We Learn for the instrumental role they have played in my journey. I urge you to support this bill and continue investing in organizations that deliver proven results in preparing Rhode Island's youth for academic and life success.

Respectfully submitted,
Francisco Gonzalez Perez
High School Advisor
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