

May 22, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney
Chair, House Committee on Finance
State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 002903

Re: H6044 – An Act Relating to Education – The Onward We Learn Scholarship Act

Dear Chair Abney,

The Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RIOPC) recognizes that affordability is a significant barrier to entry, persistence, and completion of higher education programs. Increasing cost of attendance and student debt burdens make higher education increasingly inaccessible for many Rhode Island students. Higher education plays a critical role in innovation, economic and social mobility, and workforce development. RIOPC is committed to working to increase financial resources and support services that Rhode Island students need to succeed.

RIOPC is the recipient of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant. Onward We Learn is the sub-recipient of this seven-year, \$33.6 million grant. Rhode Island GEAR UP significantly increases the number of economically disadvantaged students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. This program funds academic support, social and emotional development, college and career exploration, postsecondary preparation, and postsecondary scholarships for students in traditional public middle and high schools in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Newport school districts; in three high-need schools in Cranston; and select public charter schools in these communities. The program also serves students in the first year of postsecondary education for those attending in-state public institutions of higher education. In addition, Onward We Learn is the recipient of a \$455,000 State Designated Grant. This grant is intended to support the operations of Onward We Learn.

RIOPC is conducting a systematic evaluation of the State's postsecondary scholarship and financial assistance programs. This evaluation will examine Rhode Island's public investment in higher education through various affordability mechanisms intended to promote and expand postsecondary attainment. The objective is to provide a financial analysis and program evaluation and examine the return-on-investment of Rhode Island's statewide investment in higher education. This evaluative process will assist the Council on Postsecondary Education and the State of Rhode Island to better understand the impact of the State's public postsecondary investments.

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RIOPC appreciates the intent of this piece of legislation and the work done for Rhode Islanders as part of the GEAR UP grant. At this time, we request that no action be taken on this legislation until RIOPC can provide the findings of its evaluation of the State's existing affordability mechanisms to the Council on Postsecondary Education, the General Assembly, and the Office of Management and Budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Z. J. Saul", written in a cursive style.

Zachary J. Saul
Chief Financial Officer

cc: Honorable Members of the House Committee on Finance
Representative Mary Messier