

Rhode Island Foundation

April 28, 2026

The Honorable Marvin Abney, Chair
House Finance Committee on Finance
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Letter of Support for House Bill 8351 – The Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act

Dear Chairman Abney, First Vice Chair Slater, First Vice Chair Marzalkowski, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Rhode Island Foundation, I write in strong support of House Bill 8351, the Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act. This legislation gives statutory force to the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission, which the Foundation convened and co-chaired, and which represents an incredibly comprehensive and broadly supported effort to modernize Rhode Island's school funding system.

The Rhode Island Foundation is the state's only community foundation, and is one of the oldest and largest community foundations in the country. Our mission is to support a thriving Rhode Island, and we have long recognized that a world-class public education system is essential to that goal – both as a matter of equity and as an economic imperative. Rhode Island's 15-year-old formula, enacted as a significant step forward in its time, has not kept pace with the state's ambitions or its students' needs.

We convened the Blue Ribbon Commission because we saw both an urgent need and a moment of readiness. There was growing recognition across Rhode Island – among educators, families, municipal officials, community advocates, and policymakers – that the current system is increasingly difficult to defend. What the state needed was a structured, independent, evidence-based process to build consensus around a better approach. Convening that process by bringing together stakeholders from across traditional divides, supporting rigorous research, and creating conditions for genuine agreement, is exactly the role an institution like the Foundation is positioned to play.

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The Blue Ribbon Commission's membership spans the full breadth of Rhode Island's education community: teachers and superintendents, charter and district school leaders, municipal officials, union leaders, and community advocates. The Annenberg Institute at Brown University served as a research partner and facilitator, conducting more than 45 interviews with local stakeholders and national experts. The Institute also convened a Youth Working Group of 14 students from eight traditional public, charter, urban, suburban, and rural districts across the state – ensuring that the voices of the young people this system is meant to serve were central to our deliberations. And we convened an Accountability Working Group of national school finance and accountability experts.

We drew on evidence from leading states: California's accountability framework, Connecticut's local share requirements, Michigan's approach to multilingual learners, and others. The result is a set of four interconnected recommendations on shared costs, student-centered funding, ability-to-pay local contributions, and fiscal accountability that reflect genuine consensus among stakeholders who do not always agree. That consensus is itself significant, and we believe it signals that Rhode Island is ready for this reform.

House Bill 8351 faithfully translates the Commission's recommendations into law. It establishes a Core Education Amount benchmarked to regional per-pupil spending, adjusted annually for inflation, ensuring that Rhode Island's baseline investment keeps pace with the actual cost of education. It applies evidence-based student weights that direct additional resources to economically disadvantaged students, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities – recognizing that different students need different instructional resources. And it has the state assume responsibility for the high-cost, unpredictable expenses – extraordinary special education placements, inter-district transportation, and the legacy pension liability for retired teachers – that currently force districts into crisis budgeting.

The bill's approach to municipal contributions is both sound and fair. By tying each municipality's required contribution to its equalized property wealth, the bill ensures that costs are shared equitably across the state, while a hardship appeals process protects communities facing genuine fiscal distress. Multi-year state aid commitments give districts the budget stability they need to plan responsibly and invest in their educators and programs.

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We are equally supportive of the bill's accountability framework. The Commission was clear that increased investment alone is not sufficient – the state must also ensure that dollars are spent effectively, and that spending is linked to improved student outcomes. The Fiscal Responsibility Advisory Board, the public online dashboard, the Uniform Chart of Accounts requirement, and the tiered support and intervention system all serve that goal. Intervention is designed as partnership and support, not punishment; but the accountability is real.

Rhode Island has set a goal of becoming one of the top-performing education systems in the nation by 2030. Every year we delay reforming the funding formula; we move further from that goal, and we fail more students in the process. The Commission's recommendations represent a roadmap built on evidence, designed for Rhode Island, and supported by the breadth of the education community.

The Rhode Island Foundation respectfully urges the Committee to support House Bill 8351 and advance it to the full House. We are proud of the work the Commission did, grateful to the legislators who have championed this bill, and committed to supporting its implementation. Rhode Island's students, educators, and communities deserve a funding system built for their success.

Respectfully submitted,



President and CEO
Rhode Island Foundation
Co-Chair, Blue Ribbon Commission