

April 28, 2026

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

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

Dear Chairperson Abney and members of the House Finance Committee:

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the school funding system legislation before this committee. My name is Nora Gordon, and I am the Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. I had the honor of serving as Co-Chair of the Blue Ribbon Commission alongside David Cicilline, President and CEO of the Rhode Island Foundation.

I have spent my career studying how public dollars reach students and whether those dollars translate into better outcomes. My research on school finance — including the distributional impacts of federal Title I funding, state school finance reforms, and district fiscal accountability — has been published in leading journals including the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, the *Journal of Public Economics*, and the *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*. I have testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions and the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, and have served as an expert on federal education funding in U.S. district court. I am also a Research Associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

I share this background not as a credential, but as context: the work of this Commission is grounded in the same rigor and evidence that guides my research. And having studied school funding systems across the country, I can say with confidence that the recommendations before you represent the kind of comprehensive, well-designed reform that Rhode Island needs and that its students deserve.

The Commission's Work

Over the course of more than a year, the Blue Ribbon Commission brought together stakeholders whose perspectives are sometimes at odds — teachers and superintendents, charter and district school leaders, municipal officials and community advocates — and asked them to build consensus around a modernized funding system. With expert guidance, research, and facilitation from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, that is exactly what they did.

The process was extensive and inclusive. It included nine full Commission meetings, testimony from twelve subject-matter experts, a Youth Working Group of 14 students from 8 districts who

provided invaluable insight into how funding decisions affect students' daily lives, and an Accountability Working Group composed of national experts. An additional 45 interviews were conducted with local stakeholders and national leaders. The Commission's recommendations draw on lessons learned from across the country — California's accountability framework, Connecticut's local share requirements, Michigan's support for multilingual learners, among others — studied and tailored for Rhode Island.

Our recommendations are grounded in seven guiding principles: sufficiency, student-centeredness, comprehensiveness, predictability, transparency, equity in fiscal burden, and accountability.

The Importance of Consensus

I want to underscore something that I believe is critically important for this committee to recognize: these recommendations represent genuine consensus across traditional divides.

The members of this Commission did not agree on every detail from the start. That was by design. We brought together people with different perspectives, different priorities, and different constituencies — and through honest conversation, rigorous analysis, and a shared commitment to Rhode Island's children, they arrived at a unified set of recommendations. That unity is not incidental. It is one of this legislation's greatest strengths, and it should give this committee confidence that the reforms before you have been carefully vetted and broadly supported.

Why Reform Is Necessary

Rhode Island's current funding formula, enacted 15 years ago, was a significant step forward at the time. However, it is no longer sufficient, produces inequities, and needs to be modernized.

The current formula fails to include basic costs like transporting students to school and maintaining safe buildings. It does not adequately recognize that different students have different needs that generate different costs. It leaves districts scrambling to cover unexpected expenses, taking time and attention away from what matters most: teaching and learning. And critically, it offers no meaningful mechanism to ensure that taxpayer dollars translate into improved student outcomes.

What This Legislation Does

The legislation before you reflects the Commission's consensus recommendations, organized around four interconnected shifts.

First, it accounts for the full cost of education and shares those costs more equitably. The proposed Core Education Amount would expand the formula to incorporate nearly all costs associated with educating a student — including transportation, building maintenance, and early childhood screening — many of which currently fall outside the formula. By making these costs transparent rather than hidden, the system allows for more precise allocation of resources.

Second, it tailors instructional costs to student needs more directly. A weighted student formula would send more state dollars to districts to match the educational needs of economically disadvantaged students, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. It would also properly support high-cost career and technical education programs. This is a student-centered approach: funding follows need.

Third, it ensures greater predictability for municipalities. The proposal requires municipalities to contribute a minimum local share based on their property wealth, ensuring that everyone pays their fair share. This creates consistency and fairness across communities, reduces the budget volatility that undermines local planning, and opens the opportunity for local property tax relief by relying more on tax structures at the state level.

Fourth, it requires transparency and strategic management tied to educational outcomes. Accountability sits at the heart of our recommendations. The Commission proposes a new Fiscal Responsibility Board to ensure transparency in how districts spend taxpayer dollars and whether that spending improves student learning. Districts would be required to publicly report not just their budgets, but their progress toward closing achievement gaps. These reports must not simply be available to the public, but accessible, understandable, and widely promoted to the public. For districts struggling to meet goals, a tiered support system would provide technical assistance first and intensive state intervention when needed — not as punishment, but as partnership focused on student success.

A National Perspective

Having studied school funding systems across the country, I want to offer this committee a broader perspective. The challenges Rhode Island faces are not unique. But the Commission's response is. What sets this proposal apart is its comprehensiveness — it does not address adequacy in isolation from accountability, or equity in isolation from fiscal responsibility. It treats these as interconnected, which they are.

Too often, states reform funding formulas without building in accountability, or add accountability measures without addressing the underlying adequacy of funding. This proposal does both, and it does so based on evidence of what works. That is rare, and it is a strength of what this Commission has produced.

The Urgency of This Moment

This is a unique opportunity: the Commission has done the research, examined the evidence from across the country, and built a consensus roadmap. But the reason why now is the time to act isn't simply that now we have a Commission report.

The Foundation convened the Commission at this time for a strategic reason. Public education, nationally and in Rhode Island, faces a formidable set of challenges that are set to intensify. These

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include enrollment decline, decaying infrastructure, political polarization and declining trust in political institutions, uncertainty around federal funding across policy functions, federal vouchers, and a rapidly changing labor market. All school systems and states need their houses in order to have any hope of effectively responding to these challenges. Clear, predictable, systematic funding systems are always important for effective schooling, but they are especially critical now, when so much else is unpredictable and public trust is at risk.

The time to act is now.

Closing

I respectfully urge the members of this committee to move this legislation forward and take this important step toward building a school funding system that is fair, transparent, and effective for every child in Rhode Island.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony and for your service to the people of Rhode Island. I welcome any questions and am happy to provide additional information.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nora E. Gordon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Dr. Nora E. Gordon

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