

Graeme Griffiths
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West Greenwich, RI 02817
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Dear Chairperson Abney and members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Graeme Griffiths, and I am a junior at Exeter-West Greenwich Senior High School in West Greenwich. I am writing to express my strong support for House Bill 8351, the Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act. Last year, I had the privilege of serving as a member of the Youth Working Group of the Blue Ribbon Commission, a diverse group of education and community leaders convened by the Rhode Island Foundation and guided by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University. Our Youth Working Group brought together 14 students from 8 districts — including traditional public schools and charter schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities across Rhode Island. We were asked to share our perspective on how the school funding system affects students' daily lives, and our priorities were included in the Commission's final report and reflected in the legislation before you.

What I See/Saw in My School

As a student, I experience(d) the effects of how our schools are funded every day. Our school has an exceptionally tight budget with annual budget increases often failing to reflect even the impacts of inflation which have occurred throughout the fiscal year. Our schools are well managed but often non-essential improvements which would prevent greater costs down the line must be neglected in favor of short term budget needs. Furthermore many of our school facilities such as bathrooms are exceptionally outdated and frequently require maintenance to the discomfort of both students and staff.

What Students Told the Commission

The Youth Working Group spent months discussing these issues, and we shared a set of priorities with the full Commission. These priorities are reflected in the legislation before you:

Transportation funding is essential. Getting to and from school is a basic need, and it is a burden that affects every student in Rhode Island. Lifting that burden would improve students' lives.

Special education funding must be a core part of the system. Every student deserves equitable treatment and support, including students with disabilities. Adequate funding for special education ensures that all students can learn and succeed.

Funding should follow student needs. Investing in school social workers and improving funding for multilingual learners will help uplift and support all students — particularly those who need these services most.

Transparency and local accountability matter. Both a required local contribution and transparency about how districts spend money are necessary to fund schools adequately and effectively. Students and families deserve to know where education

dollars go. As someone who lives in a community which is often skeptical of government spending, the accountability and transparency measures would go a long way to reducing community skepticism of public education which I feel would be a benefit to both the community and the state at large.

Why This Legislation Matters

This legislation addresses each of these priorities. It creates a student-centered funding system that accounts for the full cost of education, sends more resources to students with the greatest needs, requires municipalities to contribute their fair share, and builds in real accountability and transparency so that spending is tied to results.

These recommendations were developed through a process that genuinely included student voices. The Commission listened to us, took our priorities seriously, and incorporated them into their final report. That is not something students are always asked to be part of, and it matters.

The Time to Act Is Now

I am asking you to move this legislation forward because students cannot afford to wait. Every year we operate under the current system, students in Rhode Island are not getting the support they need and deserve.

Students are paying attention to what happens in this building. We are watching, and we are asking you to invest in our future.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your consideration of this important legislation. I am grateful that the Commission included student voices in this process, and I hope this committee will give those voices weight as you make your decision.

Respectfully submitted,

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