

Testimony in Support of House Bills 7163 and 8351

Dear Chair and members of the Committee,

My name is Jen Saarinen. I am a proud public educator of more than 20 years at Kickemuit Middle School in the Bristol Warren Regional School District. I am writing today in strong support of House Bills 7163 and 8351. These bills protect public schools and help ensure fair funding across Rhode Island.

Rhode Island has not updated its school funding formula in 15 years. Even at its adoption, the formula lacked the transparency and accountability needed to ensure that all communities could adequately support and fully fund their public schools. As a result, inequities have persisted, impacting students and communities across our state.

In regional districts like Bristol Warren, budget season brings an additional layer of stress and uncertainty. The Joint Finance Committee must decide whether to approve the Superintendent's proposed budget while balancing the very different financial impacts on each town's taxpayers. House Bill 8351 would provide municipalities with greater predictability by aligning local contributions with their ability to pay, creating more consistency and fairness.

Funding the true cost of education should be a shared responsibility between the state and municipalities. Higher-cost and less predictable areas—such as transportation, facilities maintenance, and early childhood education—should be more fully supported at the state level.

Educational outcomes for all students must remain our priority. Our state's funding formula should include systems to track both outcomes and spending, and it must ensure that students who require greater resources receive them—regardless of where they live in Rhode Island.

House Bill 7163 is also critical. It would prohibit the state from opting into a federal voucher tax credit program without legislative approval. Rhode Island cannot afford to divert funding away from public schools into scholarship-granting programs.

Rhode Island needs an improved, modernized funding formula for its public schools. The time to act is now. I respectfully urge this Committee to move these bills forward. Our students deserve a fair, transparent, and effective system that supports their success and the future of our communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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