

April 28, 2026

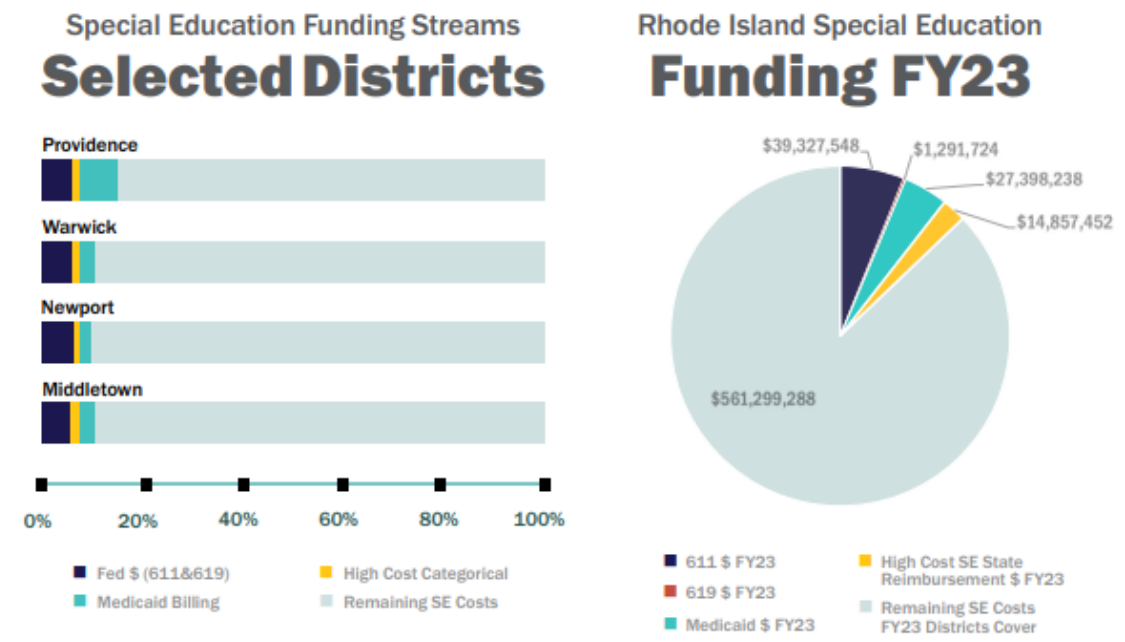
Rhode Island State House of Representatives  
Committee on Finance

Re: **Support** for H-8351 (Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act)

Dear Chairman Abney:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in **support** of H-8351 (the Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act). RIPIN is a statewide nonprofit that has helped Rhode Islanders achieve their education goals since 1991. RIPIN was founded by parents of children with disabilities, and for 35 years we have served as Rhode Island’s federally-designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC) for special education. Every year, we help thousands of families understand their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including attending 500 to 1,000 Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings annually.

We support this bill in its entirety, but focus this testimony on how this new proposal **strengthens funding for special education**. First, it must be emphasized that **our current funding formula fails to properly address the costs associated with special education**, and our State has taken an incredibly limited role in funding special education. While districts receive some State and Federal support from (1) the high-cost categorical funding, (2) federal funding under section 611 and 619, and (3) Medicaid billing, **the average Rhode Island district covers 83% of special education expenses** from their own funds or other fully fungible funds.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Many of the facts and figures in this testimony come from RIPIN’s April 2025 report entitled *Strengthening Preschool Special Education in Rhode Island*. Detailed citations and methodology are available in that report at <https://ripin.org/strengthening-preschool-special-education-in-rhode-island/>.





This proposal **strengthens special education in at least three specific ways:**

1. **Per-Capital Funding:** It proposes to **adjust per-capita funding for students with IEPs**, aligning the approach with current funding practices that adjust per-capita funding for multi-lingual learners (MLLs) and high poverty students. Just like MLLs and high-poverty students, **it is more expensive to education students with IEPs**. This proposal would align Rhode Island with thirty-six other states that include special education in their primary funding model.
2. **High-Cost Categorical Funding:** It proposes to **strengthen funding for high-cost special education students** by making it more predictable for districts. Rhode Island's current high-cost special education categorical funding is supported by a fixed pool of money. **This pool varies from year to year, as does the level of claims from districts that draw from the pool, so districts only receive an unpredictable percentage of the reimbursement to which they are potentially entitled.** For example, in State Fiscal Year 2023, the pool was funded at \$4.5 million, and districts were reimbursed only about one-third of eligible spending. In State Fiscal Year 2024, the pool was fully funded. The Governor's FY2027 budget proposes \$20 million for this pool, which is projected to be \$5.4 million less than eligible reimbursements, meaning that districts would be reimbursed roughly 80% of their eligible claims.<sup>2</sup>
3. **Preschool Special Education:** It proposes to **fix longstanding problems with the current formula's application in the unique context of preschool special education**. Districts are required to provide special education services to qualifying children between their third birthday and the start of kindergarten. Sometimes these special education services are provided in district-based classrooms (often part-week or part-day), but sometimes they **are also delivered by the district into community-based preschool settings like Head Start classrooms**. This community-based model is considered a best practice in which Rhode Island is a national leader, but the current funding formula does not make clear that districts can count these students as part of their average daily membership. This creates perverse incentives against a best-practice model. This bill proposes to fix that and **ensure that districts are fairly funded when they provide preschool special education through this best-practice model**.

The Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act would represent a giant leap forward for Rhode Island's students with disabilities and the districts that serve them. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Sincerely,

/s/

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<sup>2</sup> See Rhode Island Senate Fiscal Office, *Governor's FY2027 and FY2026 Supplemental Budget, Education Aid & Local Aid* (Feb. 13, 2026), available at [https://rilegislature.gov/sfiscal/Budget%20Analyses/Education%20Aid%20&%20Local%20Aid%20-%20FY2027%20\(Gov%20Rec\).pdf](https://rilegislature.gov/sfiscal/Budget%20Analyses/Education%20Aid%20&%20Local%20Aid%20-%20FY2027%20(Gov%20Rec).pdf) (page 11).