

Testimony in Support of House Bill 8429
House Finance Committee
Jessica Vega, Former City Council President, Central Falls

Good afternoon Chair and members of the Committee,

My name is Jessica Vega, and I'm here today as the former City Council President of Central Falls, testifying in support of HB-8429.

I strongly support returning the Central Falls School District to local control—with the appropriate guardrails and continued partnership from the state to ensure students are set up for success.

I want to begin by recognizing the progress the city has made. The recent appointment of a student to the school board is a meaningful step in elevating youth voice and ensuring that those most impacted by decisions have a seat at the table. I also want to commend city leadership for their continued investment in education—from the construction of a new school to now taking this next step toward local governance. These efforts reflect a deep commitment to the students and families of Central Falls.

Across the country, we've seen similar transitions. In Paterson, New Jersey—a district with similar challenges, including high poverty and a large multilingual learner population—the return to local control was successful because it was done thoughtfully, with continued state support and accountability. That balance is critical.

As someone who has served in local government, I can say that local policymakers, educators, parents, and students are closest to the challenges facing their schools. They understand the day-to-day realities in a way that state systems often cannot. Their proximity allows for more responsive, culturally relevant, and community-driven decision-making.

We must also be honest about what's at stake for the students who need the most support. According to the 2025 RI KIDS COUNT Factbook, students in the four core cities—including Central Falls—are more likely to receive special education services (20%) than students in the rest of the state (17%). In Central Falls specifically, 460 students—nearly 1 in 5—were receiving special education services as of June 2024. Statewide, the graduation rate for students receiving special education services in the Class of 2024 was just 65%, compared to 88% for their peers without disabilities. These students often require more intensive and costly supports, including specialized services and out-of-district placements. In a community like Central Falls, where need is concentrated, these challenges are even more significant.

That is why it is so important that this transition to local control is paired with sustained investment and a funding structure that reflects the real cost of educating all students. This bill does exactly that—by explicitly including tuition costs for students placed in out-of-district special education programs and tuition payments to other public schools within the Central Falls Stabilization Fund. That's not a technicality; it is a recognition

that some of the district's most vulnerable students require services that carry significant costs, and that the funding structure must account for them.

The bill also takes an important step for Davies Career and Technical High School and the Met Center by establishing a dedicated stabilization fund for those schools. As state-operated schools that serve students from across Rhode Island—including Central Falls—these institutions provide specialized academic and career and technical education that carries higher-than-average costs. Ensuring their financial stability is part of ensuring the full continuum of opportunity for our students.

This bill moves us in the right direction—by recognizing both the importance of local voice and the necessity of continued support. I urge the committee to move this bill forward.

Thank you for your time and consideration.