

TESTIMONY

Chairpersons, members of the committees, my name is Jean Roberson Exantus, and I am from North Providence. I am here to express my support for the SABE Act (H7389).

I would like to highlight a few key reasons why this bill deserves your attention. First, multilingual students in Rhode Island make up nearly 14% of the state's student population. Yet, many districts still lack the teachers and programs tailored to meet their specific needs. This legislation would be a major asset in addressing this issue and, consequently, to provide these students with services that truly meet their needs. Second, through the lens of multilingualism, this bill champions social justice by creating more space for individuals whose primary language is not the dominant one; this reduces exclusion and improves access to rights, education, and public services. When a single language dominates, certain individuals are placed at a disadvantage in terms of education, employment, and civic participation.

The bill fosters and celebrates linguistic diversity, thereby helping to protect minority and indigenous languages and to preserve community identities. It promotes inclusion by enabling institutions to communicate with a broader audience, rather than requiring everyone to adapt to a single standard. Furthermore, it upholds equity, as a student or parent is better able to understand information when it is made available in a language they have mastered. For instance, a school that provides documents in multiple languages, and embraces the languages spoken by its students, creates a fairer environment by lowering barriers to learning and participation. While multilingualism may not, on its own, resolve all inequalities, it serves as a concrete tool for social justice by broadening access, affirming linguistic dignity, and challenging the dominance of any single language.

This issue is one that is particularly close to my heart. I would like to share a story experienced by a classmate of mine, a 5th-grade teacher. At his school, a new student arrived from abroad speaking very little of the class's primary language. Initially, he remained silent, participated sparingly, and appeared to be struggling. Then, a teacher began allowing students to explain certain instructions in multiple languages, and a bilingual classmate stepped in to help him understand. Little by little, the student gained the confidence to speak, began performing better in his assignments, and felt a sense of belonging. This experience demonstrates that multilingualism is not merely a matter of communication; it fosters inclusion, academic success, and mutual respect. It illustrates how acknowledging and understanding a student's language can fundamentally transform their level of participation. In this story, it is clear that this shift in approach reduces the exclusion of individuals who have not yet mastered the dominant language, validated the languages of families and communities, and creates a fairer, more welcoming environment.

According to the data, it is evident that Rhode Island already possesses a well-established, and rapidly growing, multilingual reality: the state experienced the highest growth rate in the country regarding the proportion of multilingual students between 2010 and 2020. You might also note

that Rhode Island's educational system already features structured support services for multilingual learners, demonstrating that this need is both genuine and enduring. These figures clearly indicate that multilingualism is not a marginal issue in Rhode Island.

This bill is of great importance to Rhode Island, as it directly impacts equity, access to services, and community well-being, particularly insofar as it aims to dismantle barriers and protect vulnerable populations. It will serve to strengthen equitable access to the rights and services in question.

I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of this bill. Thank you for your attention.

Roberson