

Chairperson and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Representative David Morales' legislation the SABE Act (H7389), and the continued investment in multilingual education opportunities for Rhode Island students and families. My name is Larissa Guido Swenson. I came to the United States from Brazil as an adult, already holding a bachelor's degree in Education. Like many multilingual professionals, I arrived with the passion, training, and experience to contribute to the classroom - but I quickly realized that navigating the system to become a certified teacher in Rhode Island was not simple.

My degree was not immediately recognized. I faced language barriers, a lack of clear guidance, and a system that often felt confusing and inaccessible. I had to learn how to translate and evaluate my degree and transcripts, understand new certification requirements, and figure out where I fit - all while working in Multilingual Learners support roles in public schools, knowing I had more to offer.

This is a common experience. Many multilingual educators arrive here with degrees, experience, and a deep commitment to teaching, but they face barriers such as costly evaluations, complex processes, limited access to information, and a lack of coordinated support. These challenges delay - and sometimes prevent - highly qualified individuals from entering the classrooms where they are urgently needed. Despite these barriers, I persisted. I was eventually able to have my degree recognized and continue my path in education. But it should not have to be this difficult.

That is why legislation like the Support and Access to Bilingual Education (SABE) Act, House Bill 7389 and Senate Bill 2555, is so important.

We need to invest in expanding bilingual and dual language programs across Rhode Island. And equally important, we must invest in the multilingual educators who are ready to fill those classrooms - educators who reflect the languages, cultures, and lived experiences of our students.

I want to share a moment that illustrates why this matters.

In 2020, during COVID, I was a multilingual support TA in a sixth-grade ESL classroom. There was a student from Brazil named João. He attended class virtually, never turned on his camera, and never participated, but he was assigned to attend the classes in person.

One day, I joined the class and greeted him in Brazilian Portuguese: “Oi, João.” I didn’t say “Hi John”, nor “Hola Juan”. I said, “Oi João”, in his language, in my language. Immediately, he turned on his camera and said, “Você fala a minha língua!” - “You speak my language.” From that moment on, João began attending school in person and engaging in his learning. Today, he is in 11th grade.

That moment shows the power of representation and connection. When students see themselves in their educators - when they hear their language and feel understood - they show up, they engage, and they succeed. This is why we urgently need to invest in bilingual and dual language education, and in the multilingual educators who make it possible.

In my role as a PRIME Navigator with the Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island, I now support others like me - individuals who want to become teachers. I provide guidance, resources, and support to help them navigate a system that I once had to figure out on my own. My goal is to make their path clearer and more accessible, so they can enter our classrooms faster and with confidence.

The SABLE Act will help remove barriers, expand opportunities, and strengthen our educator workforce. Let’s invest in educators who reflect our communities, so that students like João can grow, succeed, and thrive.