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Testimony Re: H-5382 - AN ACT RELATING TO ELECTIONS
House Committee on State Government & Elections
March 17, 2025

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports House Bill 5382. We thank Representatives Felix for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Cruz, McNamara, Kislak, Diaz, Giraldo, Stewart, Furtado, Potter, and Batista for co-sponsoring. This bill would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school committee elections.

School committee decisions shape the daily experiences of students determining school funding, curriculum, safety policies, and extracurricular opportunities. Yet, students who are impacted by these choices are currently excluded from the decision-making process. Lowering the voting age for school committee elections would empower students to advocate for policies that reflect their needs, strengthening the connection between civic responsibility and lived experience. When young people see the direct impact of their vote, they develop a sense of agency that encourages lifelong civic participation.

Several U.S. cities already allow 16-year-olds to vote in local elections:

- Maryland: Five cities, including Takoma Park, where 16- and 17-year-olds vote at higher rates than older voters (69% vs. 54% in 2020).
- California: Berkeley and Oakland voters approved measures to allow 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections.
- New Jersey: Newark recently passed a similar law with bipartisan support.

Research shows that voting is habit-forming. Many 18-year-olds struggle with their first election due to life transitions, whereas 16-year-olds still have the support of schools and families. Students already take on adult responsibilities—working, paying taxes, and driving and should have a say in decisions affecting their education.

Passing House Bill 5382 will strengthen democracy, increase youth civic engagement, and ensure schools reflect student needs. I urge this committee to support this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.