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Written Testimony in Support of Bill H-5382
Regarding the House State Government and Elections
3/18/2025

Good evening Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am Nihil Suthy, a first-year student at Brown University studying Computational Biology and one of the Advocacy Chairs of Brown Votes, a nonpartisan university initiative committed to fostering democratic participation. I have written this testimony **in support of bill H-5382**, which would allow all citizens of age 16 or above to register and vote in their local school board elections.

At age 16, teenagers are able to do many things. They can drive a car. Get a job. Give medical consent. Even get a piloting license. However, they are unable to engage in the most rudimentary part of our democracy: voting. As school boards across the country continue to make baffling decisions, such as promoting budget cuts, banning books, and censoring topics that can be taught in classes, it's puzzling as to why students aren't given a say in electing school board officials.

With the way things currently stand, Rhode Island has a chance to make history by becoming the first state to allow their 16 and 17 year olds to vote in school board elections. While some of you may feel hesitant granting a voice to our youth, I assure you that this has been successfully implemented on the municipal level. Cities such as Berkeley, CA and Oakland, CA have passed measures that promise the same revisions offered in bill H-5382. Is this not something the state wants to be remembered for?

It became quite apparent to me this past election cycle as to why it's important students have the right to select their school board. For the past few years, my school board back home has been caught up in a prolonged debate on the state of the honors math curriculum, as the school district opted to remove honors math classes despite the pleas of parents and students. When casting my vote during the November 2024 elections, what upset me the most wasn't the removal of the honors math system. It was the fact that nobody asked for current students' input on this decision. While parents and former graduates such as myself have a say in deciding who should be on the school board, the students who are actually impacted by the decisions of the board are left at our whim. Why should they not be able to vote in what they believe in? At ages 16 and 17, they are mature enough to know what they want out of their education. Let our teens vote in their local school board elections, for it is them who are impacted by it the most.

I believe that it has been long overdue to give students a voice in their education, and now would be a better time than ever to allow Rhode Island's 16 and 17 years olds to do so. I urge you to consider the evidence and testimonies presented to you and vote in favor of bill H-5382.