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To: Rep. Cortvriend, Terri-Denise <rep-cortvriend@rilegislature.gov>

Subject: Urgent Request to Uphold Accessible Public Transportation for Non-Public School Students

Dear Representative Cortvriend,

This is Asabe Poloma. Once again, thank you for taking time to speak with me this morning. As I shared with you during our conversation, I am deeply concerned regarding the proposed policy change that would restrict non-public school students from accessing public transportation. As a resident of and homeowner in Smithfield, RI, whose two children now attend The Wheeler School in Providence, I respectfully urge you to support maintaining the current policy that allows all students—including those in private, parochial, and independent schools—to utilize RIDE services.

This proposal, if enacted, would have a profoundly negative impact on many families throughout our community. As hardworking low- and middle-income families, we are already grappling with the challenges of rising costs due to inflation, the limited access to high-quality public education in Rhode Island compared to other New England states and due to extreme gentrification and wealth gap among local Rhode Island communities (e.g., Barrington and East Greenwich compared to towns such as Smithfield), not to mention the imminent Executive branch actions that may divest and potentially shut down our Department of Education. Any reduction in public services at this time would only compound our struggles but would dismantle the strides Rhode Island has been making to ensure higher equality educational opportunities for its children.

I speak not only on behalf of my family (who is by no means wealthy or legacy private school families) but also for countless families at parochial and private schools who are working class and middle income. In fact, my children began their schooling at Old County Road School in Smithfield before we were fortunate enough to have both our children admitted to the prestigious Wheeler School in 2023, thanks to The Wheeler School's incredibly generous and substantial financial aid as well as commitment to inclusive teaching of children of different abilities and historically underrepresented communities. As a first generation Black immigrant family, we consider our children's success a realization of the American Dream. However, our ability to send them to Wheeler School is closely tied to our reliance on RIDE for both morning and afternoon transportation because my husband and I both work full-time, and he has a four-hour commute daily so essentially, I am solely responsible for their care during the week which is stressful as a working mother.

I share all this to highlight that not every private school family has means and the impact of losing public transportation access can be deleterious to many families like ours. It is also important to note that every family choosing a non-public school is already contributing to our local district's savings, reducing per pupil expenditures significantly, and as homeowners in Smithfield, our taxes continue to support our local public schools. Cutting access to transportation not only undermines these savings but also

unfairly burdens families who have limited means yet have secured admission through their hard work and diligence to private or parochial schools—a choice that should not come with the penalty of diminished access to essential services.

As co-chair of Student Transportation Commission, I respectfully request that you do not support a recommendation to eliminate access to a vital public service, such as bussing, for families like ours. While I appreciate that the state is managing tight margins and budgets, our community also deserves to have our voices heard when decisions are made that affect our children's education and daily lives.

Lastly, I know that you have been long committed to supporting school personnel, teachers and guardians - which is why I wanted to reach out to you directly. I hope you consider equally supporting guardians, parents and students by helping to keep transportation accessible for every child in our state. Thanks again for your time and especially, for your public service.

Sincerely,

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