



RIPEC

Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council
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March 4, 2026

The Honorable Hanna M. Gallo
Chairperson, Senate Committee on Education
Room 313
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re. Testimony on Senate Resolution 2018

Dear Chairperson Gallo,

I am writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) in support of Senate Resolution 2018, which proposes to submit to the electors an amendment to the state constitution guaranteeing an education that is “adequate and meaningful” to all students in Rhode Island. It is RIPEC’s position that, in the absence of an organized effort to enact urgently needed reforms to Rhode Island’s K-12 education system, a judicially enforceable guarantee to an adequate education in the state’s constitution is necessary to focus attention on the issues within this system.

The serious shortcomings in Rhode Island’s K-12 education system can be seen in recent standardized test results showing that Rhode Island students fail to demonstrate proficiency on a wide scale. On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, less than a third of 8th grade students showed proficiency in reading and only about a quarter were proficient in math.¹ Similarly, the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) results from 2024-25 showed that about a third (33.7%) of students in 3rd through 8th grade statewide were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), while only 31.4% were proficient in math.² These poor outcomes endure even though Rhode Island has a well-funded K-12 education system relative to other states.³

¹ The Nation’s Report Card, [State Profiles, Rhode Island](#).

² R.I. Dept. of Education, [Assessment Data Portal](#).

³ Of the 50 states, Rhode Island ranked 8th highest in per pupil elementary and secondary school revenue in FY 2023, the most recent year for which data are available. State revenues per pupil of \$21,182 were \$4,656 greater than the U.S. total of \$16,526. U.S. Census Bureau, [2023 Annual Survey of School System Finances](#). Rhode Island ranked even higher in K-12 spending in terms of state residents’ ability to pay; on a personal income basis, Rhode Island spending on

Although outcomes are unacceptable statewide, students from districts with high concentrations of poverty are significantly behind their peers in Rhode Island. Despite the efforts of Rhode Island’s education funding formula to direct greater resources to districts with limited fiscal capacity and a higher concentration of students living in poverty, some of the neediest communities in the state continue to have low per pupil expenditures relative to the state overall. For example, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and West Warwick all have per pupil expenditures that are below the statewide total.⁴ The funding gap in Rhode Island is moreover worse than most of the country, with one national study finding that the Ocean State has a greater funding gap between its higher- and lower-poverty districts than all but five other states.⁵

The consequences of the relative lack of resources in some of the state’s neediest districts are evident. In 2024-25, Pawtucket and West Warwick had RICAS proficiency rates well below those of the state and, in both districts, fewer than one in five students demonstrated proficiency in math or ELA. In Woonsocket, fewer than one in ten students demonstrated proficiency in math or ELA. Despite the state’s takeover of its schools over six years ago following reports of systemic failures, Providence—the state’s largest district—had proficiency rates below twenty percent in both math and ELA.⁶ Most students in these districts are not reading at grade level and have not mastered math concepts.

The poor outcomes produced by our K-12 education system are a threat to the state’s future prosperity. Students from disadvantaged households and communities are not being afforded opportunities to succeed.

While there are many well-intentioned efforts by state officials, school administrators, teachers, and community leaders to improve our schools, education reform is not being approached with the urgency needed to address the challenges in our K-12 system. A constitutional right to education could help to stimulate the bold action required to meet this challenge.

Amending the state’s constitution to include a judicially enforceable standard of adequacy in K-12 education is not a cure-all and does not come without risks. Court-mandated reforms lack accountability and can force wholesale changes that could have unpredictable effects on state and municipal finances across Rhode Island. Should the proposed amendment be made to Rhode Island’s constitution, RIPEC would urge policymakers to preempt a potential judicial intervention by acting on education reform with the urgency that the current situation demands. Indeed, research suggests that states that enact stronger constitutional language on public K-12 education see greater legislative attention paid to education reforms, and often successfully enact reforms that result in higher per

K-12 ranked sixth highest nationwide in FY 2023. RIPEC, [How Rhode Island Compares: State & Local Taxing & Spending](#), October, 2025.

⁴ R.I. Dept. of Education, [FY24 Per Pupil Expenditure Chart](#).

⁵ School Finance Indicators Database, [State School Finance Profile, 2022-23 School Year](#).

⁶ R.I. Dept. of Education, [Assessment Data Portal](#).

pupil spending, smaller class sizes, and better student performance on standardized tests.⁷ Court mandated reforms, however, have a much more mixed record. While successful education litigation has often led to higher per pupil expenditures, in some cases these increases were smaller than in states without court-mandated education reform.⁸

A judicially enforceable adequacy standard for education in the state’s constitution is not a silver bullet that will solve the critical problems with Rhode Island’s education system on its own. Indeed, the hard questions about what reforms are needed to better prepare Rhode Island students for success will not change regardless of whether the state amends its constitution. However, if meaningful reform is not otherwise forthcoming, it is important that judicial intervention be on the table to force the changes needed to turn around the system for the benefit of Rhode Island students, and the future of the state. I think we can all agree that every student in Rhode Island deserves a high-quality education.

I appreciate your consideration of these comments and RIPEC’s support for Senate Resolution 2018.

Sincerely,



Michael DiBiase
President & CEO
Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council

RIPEC is a nonpartisan and nonprofit public policy research organization dedicated to providing objective research and analysis that addresses the critical challenges surrounding public finance and economic opportunity in Rhode Island.

⁷ Scott Dallman, Anusha Nath, and Filip Premik, “[The Effect of Constitutional Provisions on Education Policy and Outcomes](#),” *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis* (2021).

⁸ Jason Kopanke, “[A Contemporary Understanding of the Effects of the Third Wave of School Finance Litigation](#),” University of Northern Colorado (2020); Stephen Q. Cornman, Esq., “[Do Equity and Adequacy Court Decisions and Policies Make a Difference for At-Risk Students following Abbott, Rose, McDuffy, and Hancock? Longitudinal Evidence from New Jersey](#),” Columbia University (2017). William J. Glenn, “[School Finance Adequacy Litigation and Student Achievement: A Longitudinal Analysis](#),” *Journal of Education Finance* 34, no. 3 (2009): 247–66.