



Office of the Child Advocate

State of Rhode Island

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

March 4, 2026

Thank you, Chair Gallo and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of Senate Bill 2018 which would amend the Constitution of the State to provide that it would be the paramount duty of the General Assembly, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and other government agencies to provide Rhode Island residents with equal opportunities to receive an education that is adequate, equitable and meaningful. Thank you to Senators Acosta, Mack, Zurier, Bissaillon, Valverde, Quezada, Thompson, Ujifusa, President Lawson and Chair Gallo for sponsoring this legislation.

My name is Katelyn Medeiros, and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. I am the Director of the agency which serves as the oversight agency to DCYF. As the oversight agency, we monitor the case of each child and young adult open to the Department to protect their legal rights and to promote policies and practices which ensure that youth are safe, and that their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral health needs are met.

Access to an equitable, meaningful education is one of the bedrocks of every child's development and overall well-being. Unfortunately, education disruption is a chronic issue for many children and youth in state care which often have long-lasting consequences. Consistent educational disruption causes students to miss formative opportunities, develop academic gaps, and allows disabilities to go undiagnosed. Addressing these issues can take years and leave students in a position of constantly being behind their peers. It also puts additional pressure on teachers who are already working extremely hard to keep students on track.

The education outcomes for children and youth in state care over the last two decades demonstrate just how detrimental education disruption can be for students open to DCYF. The 2025 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook reported that 2023-2024 school year, K-12 students in foster care had a higher rate of chronic absence than all students, 33% and 25% respectively. Additionally, only 43% of students in foster care graduated from high school within four years, compared to 84% of all students, a decrease from 51% the previous year. The mere fact that a child goes into state care should not put their long-term academic achievement at risk.

Improving educational outcomes for children and youth in state care is a key focus of the OCA's mission and the data shows that there is more work to be done. The OCA fully supports this proposed amendment to the state constitution because it represents a meaningful step toward improving educational outcomes for all of Rhode Island's students, including students open to DCYF. Ensuring that all children in Rhode Island have a fundamental right to an equitable, quality education is crucial in strengthening the state's commitment to its students by guaranteeing their right to an enriching academic experience. The right to a quality education should be the expectation, not the exception, and this proposed amendment will help guarantee that right.

Thank you for your continued support of children and families impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and children's behavioral health systems in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,



Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.

Child Advocate