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Commissioner

State of Rhode Island
DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
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April 7, 2026

Senator Hanna M. Gallo
Chair, Senate Committee on Education
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street, Room 313
Providence, RI 02903

RE: A Strategic Path Forward for Providence Schools – The Case for a Phased Transition

Dear Chair Gallo and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) believes the future of Providence Public Schools (PPSD) belongs in the hands of the Providence community, and that this transition must be smooth and well supported.

The legislation currently before the Senate Education Committee— SB 2526— which mandates an immediate and abrupt return to local control, risks undoing years of documented structural transformation and the academic progress of PPSD students.

Rather than an immediate shift in governance, RIDE proposes a phased and gradual, progressive transition of PPSD from RIDE oversight to local oversight beginning July 1, 2026, with a completed transition of oversight from RIDE to PPSD by June 30, 2027.

This proposal is built on the concept of "gradual restoration," where the Providence School Board (PSB) would immediately begin to assume authority select areas, with decision-making authority expanding over the course of the year, contingent upon the completion of key milestones. A collaborative, phased transition ensures that the return of governance authority is durable, stable, and aligned with continued student progress.

The data show clear and meaningful progress: PPSD has significant momentum, and all metrics of operational health are moving in the right direction—

- **Academic Gains:** PPSD is one of only 6 traditional LEAs in the state that now exceed their pre-pandemic 2019 results in both RICAS ELA and Math. Notably, in Math, PPSD has increased the

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percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations every year since the pandemic, rising by 9.6 percentage points from 2019 to 2025. Additionally, Education Recovery Scorecard data (Harvard, Dartmouth, and Stanford) show that from 2022–2024, PPSD’s learning recovery outpaced the state average, matched or exceeded many urban-ring and suburban LEAs, and outperformed comparable urban districts.

- **Rising Graduation Rates:** The 4-year cohort graduation rate has increased by 5.8 percentage points from 2019 to 2024. Crucially, the gap between PPSD and statewide graduation rates has been closed by more than half in that same timeframe. In addition, PPSD’s 2024 4-year cohort graduation rate represents a 10-year high.
- **Advanced Placement Success:** We have seen a 10.5% increase in AP exams taken and a remarkable 30% increase in scores of 3, 4, or 5 compared to the prior year, demonstrating that more students are not only taking rigorous courses but succeeding in them. This is especially true for Hispanic/Latino students who have seen a 23.9% increase in exams taken and 53.3% increase in scores of 3 or higher.
- **Reduction in Chronic Absenteeism:** Chronic absenteeism has declined significantly from a high of 57.1% in SY 21/22 to 29.3% in SY 24/25. This 27.8 percentage point represents the largest percentage-point reduction among traditional LEAs and translates into hundreds of thousands of additional instructional hours of instruction for Providence’s most vulnerable children.

While this progress is real, it remains dependent on systems that are still being stabilized. The transition of oversight from RIDE to PPSD would initiate a structured sequence of governance activities designed to transfer responsibility in a stable, manageable fashion.

As the district moves through the 2026-2027 academic year, and provided that established, mutually agreed upon, benchmarks for readiness are met, specific administrative and oversight authorities would be restored to the local School Board in phases.

RIDE’s proposed transition will require sustained engagement and collaboration between PPSD, The City of Providence, the Providence School Board, students, families, educators, and administrators. Working together, we must focus solely on what is best for students.

An immediate transition back to local control, before the District is prepared, risks undoing the academic progress that PPSD students are making. We have seen examples locally, such as Hope High School, and nationally, across the country, where an immediate transition to local control resulted in significant slippage because the underlying systems were not yet mature enough to withstand a sudden change in governance.

This methodical approach ensures that PPSD is fully equipped to sustain the district's momentum and assume full statutory responsibilities.

RIDE believes progressive transition is in the best interest of Providence's students, as it ensures continuity at a critical moment, it provides a safety net and will provide an ongoing framework for collaboration and growth, especially as it relates to student outcomes focused governance.

A thoughtful, phased transition to local oversight is a strategy for continuing the academic momentum of Providence students.

I urge the committee to consider a progressive transition back to local oversight to ensure that the academic progress that PPSD students are making continues.

Sincerely,



Drew Echelson

Deputy Commissioner of System Transformation

CC: Members of the Rhode Island Senate Committee on Education
Senator Samuel W. Bell
Kristen Silvia, Director of Legislation and Deputy Chief of Staff
Ms. Debbie Hayden, Committee Clerk