

Testimony of Samuel D. Zurier concerning SB-2526

Bill S-2526, submitted by the City of Providence, would return the school district to local control on July 1 of this year. It is important to note, however, that a successful return to local control requires additional actions, including legislation, that goes beyond the simple decree contained in this bill.

The Mayor published an extensive Plan for Return to Local Control last year, an excerpt of which is attached as Exhibit 1. As noted at page 37 of that plan, the Mayor identified as a “Priority Action[] Before PPSD Returns To Local Control” as the need to:

Support legislation that implements components of shared accountability at PPSD, including to address matters such as retention, seniority, due process for educators, and introducing a Providence-specific career ladder.

These initiatives were contained in three bills filed with the General Assembly last year (S-745, S-746, S-747) that were filed and heard last year before this Committee. The bills were the product of a Senate Study Commission. The bills also were endorsed by a City Council resolution, as noted in a letter from Council Member Anthony (Exhibit 2). These reforms are now included in Bill S-2934 which is pending before this Committee. A summary of the bill appears at Exhibit 3 and the bill itself at Exhibit 4. This year’s bill contains a new Section 3 that provides for a return to local control on July 1 of this year, subject to this series of expectations on the part of local authorities:

- 1. The School Board will:
 - a. Devote its primary focus to reviewing and improving student achievement outcomes;
 - b. Will work with the Superintendent in a collaborative partnership, including but not limited to the formation of the District’s strategic planning and priorities, and the preparation of meeting agendas.
- 2. The Providence School Department will:
 - a. Adopt policies and procedures to promote labor-management collaboration, including developing performance evaluation criteria for administrators that place a greater weight on advancing collaboration with teachers;
 - b. Adopt policies and procedures that promote greater site-based management;
 - c. Place a greater priority on promoting educational initiatives at the building and classroom levels by granting teachers greater flexibility in the delivery of education to students.
- 3. The City of Providence will:
 - a. Provide generous local support for the Providence Public Schools budget. Instead of limiting its contribution to the lowest possible “maintenance of effort” allowed under State law, the City will, at a minimum, increase its annual contribution per student to align with either inflation or the overall increase per student of State aid to the Providence Public Schools

In these ways, S-2934 provides a comprehensive framework to advance the simple goal of S-2526. I am hopeful the Senate Education Committee will have the chance to review S-2934 more fully at a future date.

EXHIBIT 1



Providence's Plan for Our Schools: Building a Brighter Future

April 2025



MAYOR BRETT P. SMILEY
CITY OF PROVIDENCE



SUPPORTING TALENT AT PPSD

PRIORITY ACTIONS BEFORE PPSD RETURNS TO LOCAL CONTROL

- Support legislation that implements components of shared accountability at PPSD, including to address matters such as retention, seniority, due process for educators, and introducing a Providence-specific career ladder.
- Develop capacity and protocols to support PPSD on matters relating to human resources and personnel management.

PRIORITY ACTIONS WHEN PPSD RETURNS TO LOCAL CONTROL

- Review management of all benefits, including the prior hybrid management of self-insured benefits to assess the most successful future state.
- Partner with PPSD to conduct a collaborative assessment of the District's human resources structure and services model to foster a coordinated City support system through the City's Department of People and Culture or human resources department.
- Participate in the negotiation of the collective bargaining agreement with the Providence Teachers Union (PTU).

EXHIBIT 2



Helen Anthony
Committee on Finance, Chair
Rules Committee, Member
Councilwoman – Ward 2

Senator Hanna M. Gallo
Chairwoman, Senate Education Committee
Rhode Island Senate
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Support for S0745, S0746, & S0747

Dear Chairwoman Gallo and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

I write in strong support of Senate Bills S0745, S0746, and S0747, sponsored by Senator Sam Zurier. These bills are grounded in a simple but important idea: Providence Public Schools not only need to return to local control, they also need to be set up to succeed when that happens.

As a Providence City Councilwoman, I hear constantly from families, students, and educators who are frustrated and eager for change. They want a school system that *works*—and works for everyone. That message is loud and clear, and not just in private conversations. Every time the Council considers a charter school lease or contract, the chamber fills with families looking for better options. This growing momentum cannot be ignored. If we don't respond to it, we're putting the future of PPSD at risk.

Each of these bills takes on a specific challenge within the school's labor-management system and confronts problems that have gotten worse, not better, under state control, which began in 2019. These bills don't set a date for the takeover to end. Instead, they focus on what needs to change so that when the schools do return to local control, all parties will be fully prepared and equipped. Without better systems for collaboration and accountability, we're just going to repeat the same cycle.

Anyone who has followed the struggles of Providence public schools—whether through community forums, City Council hearings, education reports, or School Board meetings—knows that the relationship between school administrators and in the classroom educators remains deeply strained. A hallmark of the state takeover is the continuation of this tension, and that has proven a major barrier to progress. These bills won't fix everything overnight, but they will help reset the rules of engagement and build a more functional and stable environment for students, teachers, and staff alike.

Senate Bill 745 helps ensure due process for teachers when it comes to dismissal or demotion. It aligns Providence's policies with what's already working in other districts. It protects tenure while also making sure student needs are not forgotten.

Senate Bill 746 gives Providence the option to adopt new kinds of salary structures. That kind of flexibility is important if we want to recruit and keep great teachers, especially in high-need roles. It gives us room to reward leadership and creativity while still managing the budget responsibly.

Senate Bill 747 updates the way the district handles layoffs and reorganizations. Instead of focusing only on seniority, it allows the district to consider what's best for students, like retaining teachers with valuable qualifications like in-district language skills or experience in high-needs schools.

Providence City Council
Providence City Hall, 25 Dorrance Street, Providence, RI 02903

The Providence City Council unanimously passed a resolution in support of these bills. They are based on the recommendations of a special commission chaired by Senator Zurier that included the Council, the Mayor's Office, RIDE, and the school district, all of whom voted to approve the commission's final report. None of us have forgotten why the takeover happened. The Johns Hopkins report was a wake-up call. The state took over for a reason, and while that intervention has had mixed results, it showed how urgent the need for change was. The Council's recent trip to Springfield, Massachusetts, to witness how their Education Empowerment Zone has transformed their schools demonstrated to us how reforms like these can work when they are rolled out carefully and with the right leadership.

Currently, the City Council's Finance Committee, of which I am the Chair, is considering a city budget that includes a substantial increase in property taxes so we can meet our overdue and state-mandated school funding obligations. This is a tough ask for our residents. If they are being asked to contribute more, they deserve to know that we are doing everything we can to build a school system that is changing for the better.

These bills don't erode teacher's rights. They clarify them. They don't hand unchecked authority to administrators. They draw clearer lines and set expectations. And they don't try to micromanage every decision. They create space and tools to solve problems locally and with a focus on students.

Providence needs more than just local control. We need a school system that people believe in again. That starts with trust, transparency, and a commitment to working together. These bills are a step in that direction.

Thank you for your time and for everything you do to support Rhode Island's students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Helen Anthony". The script is cursive and fluid.

Helen Anthony, Esq.
Councilwoman – Ward 2

EXHIBIT 3

Summary of Legislation

In 2023, the Senate authorized the formation of a study commission to review national best practices to optimize the structural conditions that will support the professional excellence that Providence teachers pursue as they carry out their important work in the classroom. The Senate chose this focus because the current adversarial relationship between labor and management has created mutual frustration which has impeded the district's longstanding commitment to improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps.

The Commission, formed from a broad array of stakeholders, heard public comment and expert testimony, issuing a report in 2024. The report concluded that if and when urban public schools develop a culture of shared accountability between labor and management, educators can achieve professional fulfillment while producing better outcomes for students. The Commission found that certain provisions of current state law (which date back to the 1960's) prevent the establishment of a culture of shared accountability in the Providence Public Schools. Therefore, the Commission recommends the passage of a bill with three sections to remove these legislative barriers to progress. The bill's scope is limited to the Providence Public Schools. The three sections are as follows:

- **Section One** would permit the Providence Public Schools to develop a “career ladder” for its teachers, allowing them to be rewarded for professional excellence and the willingness to take on additional responsibilities. This Section revises the current law’s requirement that compensation be tied strictly to years of service without regard to the needs of students or a teacher’s unique professional skills.
- **Section Two** contains two reforms.
 - The first would remove the current mandate that all reductions in staffing resulting from declining enrollment be carried out exclusively on the basis of seniority. If enacted, this would allow the Providence Public Schools to consider other criteria that would better align the faculty’s professional skills with the specific needs of the school’s student population. Rhode Island’s current “seniority only” law is a national outlier. The proposed reforms are based on the law of Massachusetts.
 - The second would establish a program of expedited due process for the review of teachers whose performance does not meet professional standards. Current law requires multiple layers of review that can require years to bring about resolution. Based on the law of Massachusetts, Section One would establish an arbitration process enabling these decisions to be made fairly and promptly.
- **Section Three** would provide as follows:
 - The Providence Public Schools will return to local control on July 1, 2026 subject to the following expectations:

- 1. The School Board will:
- a. Devote its primary focus to reviewing and improving student achievement outcomes;
- b. Will work with the Superintendent in a collaborative partnership, including but not limited to the formation of the District's strategic planning and priorities, and the preparation of meeting agendas.
- 2. The Providence School Department will:
- a. Adopt policies and procedures to promote labor-management collaboration, including developing performance evaluation criteria for administrators that place a greater weight on advancing collaboration with teachers;
- b. Adopt policies and procedures that promote greater site-based management;
- c. Place a greater priority on promoting educational initiatives at the building and classroom levels by granting teachers greater flexibility in the delivery of education to students.
- 3. The City of Providence will:
- a. Provide generous local support for the Providence Public Schools budget. Instead of limiting its contribution to the lowest possible "maintenance of effort" allowed under State law, the City will, at a minimum, increase its annual contribution per student to align with either inflation or the overall increase per student of State aid to the Providence Public Schools.

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EXHIBIT 4

2026 -- S 2934

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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2026

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A N A C T

RELATING TO EDUCATION -- FOUNDATION LEVEL SCHOOL SUPPORT

Introduced By: Senator Samuel D. Zurier

Date Introduced: March 04, 2026

Referred To: Senate Education

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Section 16-7-29 of the General Laws in Chapter 16-7 entitled "Foundation
2 Level School Support [See Title 16 Chapter 97 — The Rhode Island Board of Education Act]" is
3 hereby amended to read as follows:

4 **16-7-29. Minimum salary schedule.**

5 (a) ~~Every~~ Except as provided in subsection (b) of this section, every municipality and
6 regional school district shall establish and put into full effect by appropriate action of its school
7 committee in a municipality or regional school district where the school committee is elected, or
8 by appropriate action of the chief executive officer, in a municipality where the school committee
9 is appointed, a salary schedule recognizing years of service, experience, and training for all certified
10 personnel regularly employed in the public schools and having no more than twelve (12) annual
11 steps. The term "school year" as applied to the salary schedule means the ten (10) calendar months
12 beginning in September and ending the following June.

13 **(b) In the Providence public school district only, the parties may negotiate alternative salary**
14 **schedules that do not include the provisions of section (a) of this section, and which may include**
15 **other bases for increased compensation including, but not limited to, bonuses for teachers willing**
16 **to take on greater responsibilities.**

17 ~~(c)~~ Nothing in this section shall prohibit a freeze or reduction of the monetary value of
18 the steps in the salary schedule through the collective bargaining process.

19 SECTION 2. Sections 16-13-4 and 16-13-6 of the General Laws in Chapter 16-13 entitled

1 "Teachers' Tenure" are hereby amended to read as follows:

2 **16-13-4. Statement of cause for dismissal — Hearing — Appeals — Arbitration.**

3 (a)(1) ~~For districts other than Providence public school district, the~~ ~~The~~ statement of cause
4 for dismissal shall be given to the teacher, in writing, by the governing body of the schools. The
5 teacher may, within fifteen (15) days of the notification, request, in writing, a hearing before the
6 school committee or school board. The hearing shall be public or private, in the discretion of the
7 teacher. Both teacher and school board shall be entitled to be represented by counsel and to present
8 witnesses. The board shall keep a complete record of the hearing and shall furnish the teacher with
9 a copy. Any teacher aggrieved by the decision of the school board shall have the right of appeal to
10 the department of elementary and secondary education and shall have the right of further appeal to
11 the superior court. Any decisions rendered must be approved by a majority of the full board.
12 Members voting on a decision must have been in attendance at the hearing.

13 (2)(i) For the Providence public school district, a principal may dismiss or demote any
14 teacher or other person assigned full-time to the school, subject to the review and approval of the
15 superintendent; and subject to the provisions of this section, the superintendent may dismiss any
16 employee of the school district. In the vase of employees whose duties require them to be assigned
17 to more than one school, and in the case of teachers who teach in more than one school, those
18 persons shall be considered to be under the supervision of the superintendent for all decisions
19 relating to dismissal or demotion for cause.

20 (ii) Teachers who have been teaching in a school system for at least ninety (90) calendar
21 days shall not be dismissed unless they have been furnished with written notice of intent to dismiss
22 and with an explanation of the grounds for dismissal in sufficient detail to permit the teachers to
23 respond and documents relating to the grounds for dismissal, and, if they so request, have been
24 given a reasonable opportunity within ten (10) school days after receiving such written notice to
25 review the decision with the principal or superintendent, as the case may be, and to present
26 information pertaining to the basis for the decision and to the teacher's status. The teachers
27 receiving such notice may be represented by an attorney or other representative at such meeting
28 with the principal or superintendent. Teachers without professional teacher status shall otherwise
29 be deemed employees at will.

30 (iii) A teacher with tenure shall not be dismissed except for inefficiency, incompetency,
31 incapacity, conduct unbecoming a teacher, insubordination or failure on the part of the teacher to
32 satisfy teacher performance standards developed pursuant to chapter 38 of this title or other just
33 cause.

34 (iv) A teacher with tenure status may seek review of a dismissal decision within thirty (30)

1 days after receiving notice of their dismissal by filing a petition for arbitration with the
2 commissioner. The commissioner shall forward to the parties a list of three (3) arbitrators provided
3 by the American Arbitration Association. Each person on the list shall be accredited by the national
4 Academy of Arbitrators. The parties each shall have the right to strike one of the three (3)
5 arbitrators' names if they are unable to agree upon a single arbitrator from amongst the three (3).
6 The arbitration shall be conducted in accordance with the rules of the American Arbitration
7 Association to be consistent with the provisions of this section. The board of education shall
8 determine the process for selecting arbitrators for the pool. The fee for the arbitration shall be split
9 equally between the two (2) parties involved in the arbitration. The rules governing the arbitration
10 procedure shall be the rules of the American Arbitration Association as pertains to arbitration.

11 (v) At the arbitration hearing, the teacher and the school district may be represented by an
12 attorney or other representative, present evidence, and call witnesses and the school district shall
13 have the burden of proof. In determining whether the district has proven grounds for dismissal
14 consistent with this section, the arbitrator shall consider the best interests of the pupils in the district
15 and the need for elevation of performance standards.

16 (vi) The arbitrator's decision shall be issued within one month from the completion of the
17 arbitration hearing, unless all parties involved agree otherwise, and shall contain a detailed
18 statement of the reasons for the decision. Upon a finding that the dismissal was improper under the
19 standards set forth in this section, the arbitrator may award back pay, benefits, reinstatement, and
20 any other non-financial relief or any combination thereof. Under no circumstances shall the
21 arbitrator award punitive, consequential, or nominal damages or compensatory damages other than
22 back pay, benefits or reinstatement. In the event the teacher is reinstated, the period between the
23 dismissal and reinstatement shall be considered to be time served for purposes of employment. The
24 arbitral decision shall be subject to judicial review as provided in chapter 9.2 of title 28.

25 (vii) With the exception of other remedies provided by statute, the remedies provided in
26 this section shall be the exclusive remedies available to teachers for wrongful termination.

27 (b) Nothing contained in this section shall be construed to prohibit, or at any time to have
28 prohibited, a school committee in a municipality or regional school district with an elected school
29 committee, or the chief executive officer in a municipality with an appointed school committee
30 from agreeing, in a collective bargaining agreement, to the arbitration of disputes arising out of the
31 nonrenewal, dismissal, and/or suspension of a teacher pursuant to §§ 16-13-2, 16-13-3, and/or 16-
32 13-5.

33 **16-13-6. Suspension because of decrease in school population — Seniority —**
34 **Reinstatement.**

1 (a)(1) For all local education authorities other than the Providence public school district, a
2 school board may, by reason of a substantial decrease of pupil population within its school
3 system, suspend teachers in numbers necessitated by the decrease in pupil population; provided,
4 however, that suspension of teachers shall be in the inverse order of their employment unless it is
5 necessary to retain certain teachers of technical subjects whose places cannot be filled by teachers
6 of earlier appointment; and, provided further, that teachers who are suspended shall be reinstated
7 in the inverse order of their suspension. No new appointments shall be made while there are
8 available teachers so suspended.

9 (2)(i) The Providence public school district board may, by reason of substantial decrease
10 of pupil population within its school system, suspend teachers in numbers necessitated by the
11 decrease in pupil population; provided, however, that no teacher with tenure shall be laid off
12 pursuant to a reduction in force or reorganization, if there is a teacher without tenure for whose
13 position the covered employee is currently certified or if there is a less qualified teacher with tenure
14 holding the same or similar position for which the covered employee is currently certified. No
15 teacher with tenure shall be displaced in accordance with terms of a collective bargaining
16 agreement or otherwise by a more senior teacher with unless the more senior teacher is currently
17 certified and is at least as qualified for the position as the junior teacher holding the position.

18 (ii) The criteria for determining a qualified teacher under this subsection shall be subject
19 to the collective bargaining agreement; provided, however, that any such collectively bargained for
20 qualifications shall include, as the primary factors, indicators of job performance, including overall
21 ratings resulting from comprehensive evaluations and the best interests of the students in the school
22 or district.

23 (iii) A teacher meeting one of the following criteria and who has not received an
24 unsatisfactory performance evaluation in the school year immediately prior to the school year in
25 which a layoff is announced shall be exempted without regard to tenure:

26 (A) A teacher who graduated from an in-district secondary school if the district has higher
27 than the state percentage of high-needs students, as defined by the department;

28 (B) A teacher who works in a school that is among the top twenty percent (20%) of schools
29 with the highest percentage of high-needs students in the district, as defined by the department;

30 (C) A teacher who works in a school that is among the top twenty percent (20%) of schools
31 with the lowest staff retention in the district;

32 (D) A teacher deemed by the department as a teacher of the year;

33 (E) A teacher who received the highest rating on a performance evaluation delivered in
34 either or both of the school years immediately prior to the school year in which a layoff is

1 announced; or

2 (F) A teacher with linguistic proficiency in relation to in-district language or dialect. For
3 purposes of this subsection, linguistic proficiency means:

4 (I) Holding the state's Bilingual Education Endorsement;

5 (II) Achieving at least an Advanced Low score on the Oral Proficiency Interview or Writing
6 Proficiency Test proficiency tests offered through the American Council for the Teaching of
7 Foreign Languages; or

8 (III) Another method of verification or attestation of proficiency as determined by the
9 district superintendent. For the purpose of this subsection, in relation to in-district language or
10 dialect shall mean proficiency specifically in a language or dialect other than English that is spoken
11 by the greater of:

12 (aa) Five percent (5%) or more of the students enrolled at the school where a teacher is
13 assigned or, if the teacher is not assigned to a school, of the students enrolled in the district; or

14 (bb) At five percent (5%) or more of the homes of the students enrolled at the school where
15 a teacher is assigned or, if the teacher is not assigned to a school, of the homes of the students
16 enrolled in the district.

17 (iv) Among the remaining teachers without tenure, no teacher shall be laid off pursuant to
18 a reduction in force or reorganization if there is a less qualified teacher without such status holding
19 the same or similar position for which the covered employee is currently certified.

20 (v) The school committee and the collective bargaining representative may negotiate for
21 seniority or length of service only as a tie-breaker in personnel actions under this subsection among
22 teachers whose qualifications are no different using the qualifications collectively bargained for in
23 accordance with this subsection.

24 (b) Notice of suspension under this section and § 16-13-5 shall be given, in writing, by the
25 governing body of schools on or before June 1 notifying the teacher that his or her employment for
26 the ensuing year shall be suspended, provided however, notice by that date need not be provided in
27 the instance of an emergency performance-related cause.

28 SECTION 3. Chapter 16-7.1 of the General Laws entitled "The Paul W. Crowley Rhode
29 Island Student Investment Initiative [See Title 16 Chapter 97 — The Rhode Island Board of
30 Education Act]" is hereby amended by adding thereto the following section:

31 **16-7.1-5.3. Termination of reconstitution and control of the Providence Public**
32 **schools.**

33 Notwithstanding other provisions of Rhode Island law, and notwithstanding the actions of
34 the board of education and/or its council on elementary and secondary education, the

1 commissioner’s order of reconstitution and control of the Providence public schools issued on
2 October 15, 2019, shall terminate on June 30, 2026, subject to the following expectations:

3 (1) The school board will:

4 (i) Devote its primary focus to reviewing and improving student achievement outcomes;

5 (ii) Work with the superintendent in a collaborative partnership including, but not limited
6 to, the formation of the district’s strategic planning and priorities, and the preparation of meeting
7 agendas.

8 (2) The Providence school department will:

9 (i) Adopt policies and procedures to promote labor-management collaboration, including
10 developing performance evaluation criteria for administrators that place a greater weight on
11 advancing collaboration with teachers;

12 (ii) Adopt policies and procedures that promote greater site-based management;

13 (iii) Place a greater priority on promoting educational initiatives at the building and
14 classroom levels by granting teachers greater flexibility in the delivery of education to students.

15 (3) The city of Providence will provide generous local support for the Providence public
16 schools budget. Instead of limiting its contribution to the lowest possible “maintenance of effort”
17 allowed under state law, the city will, at a minimum, increase its annual contribution per student to
18 align with either inflation or the overall increase of per student state aid to the Providence public
19 schools.

20 SECTION 4. This act shall take effect upon passage.

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EXPLANATION
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF
A N A C T
RELATING TO EDUCATION -- FOUNDATION LEVEL SCHOOL SUPPORT

1 This act would allow a different minimum salary schedule for Providence public school
2 teachers whereby such teachers would be entitled to certain bonus and/or increased compensation
3 for taking on greater responsibilities. This act would further amend the teachers' tenure act for
4 Providence public school teachers and provide a process for the dismissal and demotion for teachers
5 or other persons assigned full-time to the school, and allow the Providence public school district,
6 by reason of a substantial decrease of pupil population within its school system, to suspend teachers
7 in numbers necessitated by the decrease in pupil population and provide a process for any
8 suspensions. This act would also terminate the order of reconstitution and control of the Providence
9 public schools on June 30, 2026.

10 This act would take effect upon passage.

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