



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
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To: Senate Education Committee
From: Jeremy Sencer, RIFTHP Field Representative
Date: May 13, 2026
Re: Charter School Moratorium & Cap Reduction
Testimony in Support of S 2787 (Murray, et al.)

On behalf of RIFTHP, I submit testimony in support of S 2787, legislation that creates a temporary pause on charter school expansion and reduces the statewide charter cap in order to protect public school funding, stabilize municipal budgets, and allow Rhode Island to evaluate the long-term impact of continued charter growth.

After thirty years of unchecked charter expansion, Rhode Island has created a fragmented parallel school system that places growing fiscal pressure on municipalities and diverts resources away from neighborhood public schools that serve the overwhelming majority of students. Rhode Island now operates more than 60 education entities, including 24 charter LEAs, each with separate administrative and operational structures. In a small state with limited resources and declining enrollment, this level of fragmentation is increasingly unsustainable.

Rhode Island also has one of the highest concentrations of charter enrollment in the Northeast relative to the size of its public education system. Despite serving only approximately 140,000 students statewide, Rhode Island enrolls roughly 13,000 students in charter schools — more than Connecticut, which serves over 500,000 students statewide. Unlike Rhode Island, neighboring states have implemented meaningful fiscal guardrails to protect districts from unchecked charter growth. Massachusetts, for example, limits charter tuition to 9% of district spending in most communities, with limited exceptions up to 18% in the lowest-performing districts. Rhode Island has no comparable protections or automatic enforcement mechanisms to shield municipalities from fiscal disruption.

The impact of charter expansion has fallen disproportionately on Rhode Island’s urban core communities. According to RI House Fiscal FY2025 data, 27.6% of Providence students, 40.8% of Central Falls students, 22.8% of Pawtucket students, and 11% of Woonsocket students attend charter or state schools. These enrollment shifts represent major transfers of both students and funding away from district public schools and create significant instability for districts already serving the highest concentrations of poverty and student need.

Traditional public schools continue to serve every student who walks through the door, including students with the highest academic, behavioral, and special education needs. However, charter schools do not enroll and retain students with disabilities and multilingual learners at rates comparable to their sending districts.

For example:

- Providence Public Schools serves student populations that are approximately 19% students with disabilities and 40% multilingual learners.
- Central Falls serves approximately 15% students with disabilities and 41% multilingual learners.
- Pawtucket serves approximately 16% students with disabilities and 19% multilingual learners.
- Woonsocket serves approximately 28% students with disabilities and 20% multilingual learners.

By comparison:

- Achievement First enrolls approximately 8% students with disabilities.
- Excel enrolls approximately 5%.
- Segue enrolls approximately 10%.
- Paul Cuffee enrolls approximately 10%.

356 SMITH STREET PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02908-3761 (401) 273-9800 FAX (401) 331-8815

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At Achievement First, all special education services are delivered exclusively through inclusion models, and the school does not provide specialized classrooms or extended school year/summer programming for students with the highest needs.

The disparity is also reflected in Rhode Island's high-cost special education reimbursement data. Statewide reimbursement funding totals approximately \$15 million annually, with the largest reimbursements going to traditional public school districts including Providence (\$4.3 million), Cranston (\$1.3 million), and Pawtucket (\$795,000). By comparison, the total statewide reimbursement for charter schools is approximately \$34,050 despite charters enrolling more than 14,000 students statewide. This reflects the reality that district schools continue to shoulder the overwhelming majority of high-cost special education responsibilities.

District schools are also required to continue serving students who return from charter schools during the academic year, often without corresponding funding adjustments. During House Education Committee testimony this session, a charter operator acknowledged removing students who did not meet behavioral expectations — something traditional public schools cannot do. District schools remain legally and morally obligated to serve every student regardless of behavioral history, disability status, or level of need.

Rhode Island is simultaneously experiencing declining student enrollment while making a once-in-a-generation investment in school construction and modernization. Expanding additional parallel systems while enrollment declines raises serious concerns about long-term planning, utilization of public assets, and fiscal sustainability.

Charter schools were originally envisioned by the American Federation of Teachers and Al Shanker as small-scale innovation centers designed to share best practices and strengthen public education systems. In Rhode Island, that original vision has been replaced by a permanently expanding parallel system that competes with neighborhood public schools for limited public funding. Rhode Island is no longer adding niche innovation models — it is expanding a separate system.

The current statewide cap is also functionally meaningless because charter networks are counted as a single charter under state law. For example, the seven Achievement First schools are counted as only one charter under the cap structure, allowing large network operators to continue expanding despite the appearance of statutory limitations.

Recent events have further raised concerns about accountability and local control. Municipalities have filed litigation regarding the proposed De La Comunidad charter application, alleging violations of state law and local approval requirements. At the same time, educator-led innovation proposals within traditional public schools have struggled to receive similar support. In 2020, the Providence Teachers Union proposed a dual-language community school model within Providence Public Schools that was ultimately rejected, while similar concepts are now being advanced through charter expansion outside the district system.

There are also serious workforce concerns associated with network charter expansion. Teachers at many mayoral academies and network charters are nonunion, lack tenure protections, and are excluded from participation in the state pension system. Many network operators also require individual schools to send funding out-of-state to parent organizations and management structures. Across all seven Achievement First schools, approximately 66% of teachers are inexperienced and 41% are teaching under emergency certification.

At the same time, executive compensation within network charter systems continues to raise concerns regarding priorities and accountability. The CEO of Achievement First reportedly earned approximately \$476,432 in 2024 despite not having a background in education.

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Finally, approximately 60% of Rhode Island charter schools receive only one- or two-star ratings under the state accountability system. After thirty years of expansion, Rhode Island has not seen the broad systemic improvements that charter advocates promised. A reduced statewide cap is a reasonable and responsible step to ensure Rhode Island prioritizes quality, accountability, and sustainability over unchecked expansion.

S 2787 does not eliminate charter schools. It creates a temporary pause on expansion and reduces the statewide cap so Rhode Island can evaluate long-term fiscal impacts, educational outcomes, equity concerns, and system-wide sustainability before authorizing further growth.

For these reasons, RIFTHP urges the Committee to support S 2787.

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