

To Chair Gallo and Members of the Committee:

I write today in opposition to SB 2787 and SB 2784, which would limit public school opportunities for Rhode Island students and families.

Charter public schools are not separate from Rhode Island's public education system; we are part of it. Charter public schools are public schools. We are publicly authorized, publicly accountable, and reviewed by the state through the charter renewal process. At TAPA, we take that responsibility seriously because our work is part of Rhode Island's public education system.

TAPA was started by a group of community members nearly 17 years ago because they saw an unmet need for more public school arts programming. The performing arts are central to TAPA's mission. They are what get students in the door every day, and they are what help students stay engaged through high school and on the path to college.

Students come to TAPA for a variety of reasons, and they stay because they find a public school where they feel like they belong, where adults know them, and where learning connects to who they are. TAPA helps the class clown become the leading lady on stage. It helps the kid who will not stop tapping his pencil learn rhythm on the drums. It helps the kid who will not stay off TikTok learn how to make videos that challenge misinformation. It helps the community cheerleader learn that the roots of cheer are connected to cultural dance.

Those students — the class clown, the tapping kid, the TikTok star, and the cheerleader — are Providence public school students looking for a school that sees their struggles as strengths and gives them a place to belong and thrive. That sense of belonging is not separate from academic success. It supports it.

At TAPA, our scale is small, but our impact is significant. Students with IEPs who struggled in more traditional settings have found confidence and academic success through the performing arts. English language learners have built strong academic skills, found their voices, and graduated as leaders, including delivering valedictory speeches. LGBTQ+ students have found a public school space where they feel a real sense of belonging that enables them to thrive. These examples show what can happen when a public school offers the right setting, support, and hands-on learning for a student's needs.

Our recent expansion has helped us serve students earlier, starting in grade 5. That shift has allowed students to find the right fit earlier in their education, before they become disconnected from school. Our community has been strengthened by that expansion, and our outcomes have been enriched as a result.

A moratorium is the wrong direction for Rhode Island. Families are asking for public school options that meet their children's needs, and the state should not respond by closing off those

options. That is not just my view as a charter school leader. Recent statewide polling found that 88% of voters agree families should be able to choose the type of school that fits their child's needs, 78% support giving more children access to charter public schools, and 60% have a favorable opinion of charter public schools.

Public education is stronger when students have real pathways to schools where they can belong, engage deeply, and succeed. Limiting those pathways does not strengthen public education.

TAPA is not the only public charter school built around a specific student need. Across Rhode Island, nearly 13,000 students attend charter public schools with different missions and models, including arts, theatre, dual language, environmental education, nursing, sciences, construction trades, and college and career preparation. TAPA is one part of that broader public school landscape: a small, arts-driven school serving high-needs students who need learning to feel connected, active, and meaningful.

Charter public schools do not aim to create division within public education. At TAPA, we work closely with our partners in Providence Public Schools and view TAPA as one public option for arts-driven students who may not have found the right fit in a larger district setting. TAPA does not take students out of public education. TAPA helps keep families in public education by making sure there are public school options that work for them.

When families find a school that fits their child, they are more likely to stay in the public system rather than look outside it. TAPA is a school where oddball kids fit, and where families stay. Our grades are filled with the younger siblings, cousins, relatives, and neighbors of TAPA graduates and alumni.

Rhode Island's public education system is stronger when it includes a range of public school models. Public education should not mean one model, one setting, or one pathway. It should include schools with different missions, different strengths, and different ways of helping students connect to learning.

These bills would move Rhode Island in the wrong direction. Rather than limiting opportunity, we should support a public education system with room for different public school models, so every child can attend a school that is right for them.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Richards-Hegnauer
Superintendent and Head of School
TAPA: Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts