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May 19, 2026

RE: Testimony in Opposition to S2934 (Against)

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Sherry Powell, and I serve as an integrated ESL grade 1 teacher in Providence Public Schools at Lillian Feinstein Elementary [Sackett Street Elementary School](#). I have worked in public education for 22 years, including many years serving students and families in Providence. I am writing respectfully in opposition to Senate Bill S2934.

I chose to work in Providence because I believe deeply in public education and in the students who walk into our schools every day carrying enormous potential along with very real challenges. Over the years, I have worked with students learning English for the first time, students with disabilities, students coping with housing instability, trauma, poverty, and loss, and students who simply needed consistency and someone who believed in them. What has always mattered most to me is building stable relationships with students and families and creating classrooms where children feel safe, supported, and able to learn.

That kind of stability depends not only on students and families, but also on educators being treated fairly and professionally. S2934 raises serious concerns because it creates a separate and unequal system for Providence educators that does not apply to teachers in any other district in Rhode Island. I believe that is both unfair and harmful.

Providence teachers already work under uniquely challenging

conditions. We have endured years of state intervention, constant restructuring, staffing shortages, leadership turnover, changing expectations, and uncertainty. Throughout all of that, educators continued showing up for students every day. Now, as the state discusses ending the takeover, it is troubling to see legislation that would continue extraordinary measures targeted only at Providence teachers long after other districts remain protected by standard statewide labor and due process practices.

One of my greatest concerns is the weakening of due process and tenure protections. These protections are often misunderstood by the public. They are not guarantees of lifetime employment or shields against accountability. They exist to ensure fairness, consistency, and protection against arbitrary decision-making. In a profession where educators advocate for students, raise concerns about services, or question decisions that affect children, due process matters greatly.

During my years in Providence, I have worked under administrators who were excellent instructional leaders, collaborative, and fair. I have also experienced periods of instability where expectations shifted rapidly and communication was inconsistent. In those situations, objective protections and clearly defined procedures help maintain professionalism and fairness. Removing or weakening those safeguards opens the door to subjective decision-making that can vary greatly depending on leadership changes within a building or district.

I am also concerned about efforts within S2934 that diminish seniority and layoff protections specifically for Providence educators. Seniority should not be viewed simply as a number of years worked. Experienced educators contribute institutional knowledge, mentoring, classroom management skills, and long-term relationships with students and families. Stability among staff benefits children directly. Students thrive when schools retain experienced teachers who know the community and understand the

unique needs of Providence students.

Without clear and objective layoff protections, staffing decisions could become increasingly inconsistent or vulnerable to favoritism. Teachers should not have to fear that changes in administration, personal disagreements, or subjective evaluations could determine whether they remain employed. Such uncertainty damages morale and creates an unhealthy working environment that ultimately affects students.

Another concern is the increasing reliance on subjective evaluations and administrative discretion in place of objective standards. Evaluations absolutely have a role in professional growth and accountability. Most educators welcome constructive feedback and want to improve. However, teaching effectiveness cannot always be reduced to limited metrics or interpreted consistently across different administrators and schools.

In Providence, classrooms can look dramatically different from one another because student needs vary so widely. A teacher working with newcomers learning English, students with severe behavioral needs, or children performing significantly below grade level may face challenges that standardized evaluation systems cannot fully capture. When employment protections are weakened while evaluation systems become more subjective, educators understandably worry that decisions may not always be equitable or consistent.

I am equally concerned about provisions that encourage alternative compensation systems or bonus-based pay structures. While these ideas are often presented as innovative, they risk creating competition rather than collaboration among educators. In my experience, strong schools are built through teamwork. Teachers share resources, support one another, problem-solve together, and work collectively to help students succeed. Compensation systems tied to subjective criteria or fluctuating incentives can create

tension, inconsistency, and perceptions of favoritism.

Providence already faces significant challenges with recruitment and retention. Many educators leave not because they do not care about students, but because of burnout, instability, and uncertainty about the future. Policies that weaken workplace protections and create additional unpredictability will only make recruitment more difficult. Young educators considering where to begin their careers may hesitate to choose Providence if they know they will have fewer protections than teachers elsewhere in Rhode Island.

Students are the ones most affected by high turnover. Children benefit from stable school communities and experienced educators who remain in the district long term. Every time schools lose effective teachers, students lose trusted relationships and continuity in their learning environment. If the goal is truly to improve outcomes for Providence students, we should be focusing on strengthening and supporting the educator workforce rather than creating policies that may further destabilize it.

I also struggle with the contradiction at the center of this legislation. If the state believes Providence is ready to transition out of takeover status, then Providence educators should be treated with the same standards and protections afforded to educators in every other district. Continuing to impose extraordinary measures solely on Providence sends the message that our schools and educators remain exceptions rather than equal participants in Rhode Island's public education system.

Providence students deserve investment, consistency, and respect. So do the educators who have remained committed to this district through years of uncertainty and change. Accountability and improvement are important, but they should not come at the expense of fairness, transparency, and professional dignity.

I respectfully urge the Senate Education Committee to oppose S2934. I ask that you support policies that strengthen public

education by promoting collaboration, stability, fairness, and long-term investment in Providence schools rather than creating unequal standards for one district alone.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sherry Powell, GenEd, SpEd, ESL

Grade 1 ESL

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Providence Public Schools