

May 19, 2026

Testimony of Susan F. Lusi on Senate Bill S-2934

Submitted via email to SLegislation@rilegislature.gov

Chair Gallo and Members of the Senate Committee on Education,

I am submitting my testimony in support of S-2934 to you in writing because I am out of state and unable to testify in person. I have 40 years of experience in education – most of it in Rhode Island. I have served at both the district and state levels of the education system, including as superintendent in Providence, and I spent eight years leading a national non-profit working to improve schools, districts, and state education agencies. While in Providence, then Union President, Steve Smith, and I received national recognition for working to forward labor-management collaboration in the district.

I strongly urge you to pass S-2934. Passage of this bill would be an important step in changing some of the legislative constraints facing Providence schools and addressing some of the major challenges to teacher quality highlighted in the Hopkins report – the report that laid the ground work for the state takeover. This bill includes the legislative portion of the recommendations that emerged from the Special Senate Legislative Commission to Review Providence Public Schools. This commission was chaired by Senator Zurier and was created after Steve Smith and I published an editorial that identified barriers to improving Providence Schools starting with state law. The bill also outlines important expectations regarding governance of the district, again addressing barriers that were highlighted in the Hopkins report.

The state takeover of Providence has been in place for six and a half years. Progress has been made and much more progress needs to be made as and after the schools are returned to local control. Returning the schools under the same set of constraints that existed prior to the takeover will not support the continued improvement that is desperately needed to serve Providence students and families well. As Albert Einstein said, *“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”* In the case of Providence schools, doing the same thing over again would not only be insanity, it would be a miscarriage of justice, because the students and families of Providence are not receiving the equitable educational opportunities they deserve.

Continuing to attract and retain high quality teachers in Providence is vitally important. As students, families, educators, and researchers know, having a high quality teacher for every student is of paramount importance. Research also shows that the best schools not only

have high quality teachers, but that these teachers work together in a cohesive school community to further student learning and success.

Section One of S-2934 enables the negotiation of a career ladder in Providence so that talented teachers can be rewarded for doing more to serve students and enhance the profession. Steve and I were working to rethink the compensation structure in this way in contract negotiations in 2014, but we would have needed changes in state law to make that new system a reality. Changing compensation structures so that talented and dedicated teachers can earn more earlier in their careers would aid in both teacher recruitment and retention because teachers wouldn't have to wait 10-12 years to earn higher salaries.

Section Two of the legislation contains two reforms. The first is designed to facilitate the removal of teachers who are not meeting professional standards. The difficulty of removing poorly performing teachers was highlighted in the Hopkins report based on interviews with both administrators and teachers (Hopkins, pp. 41-42). S-2934 establishes due process for Providence teachers that is both fair and timely by providing them with *the same due process rights provided to every teacher in the state of Massachusetts*.

Current due process laws stand in the way of labor-management collaboration around ensuring the quality of the teaching profession. When Mr. Smith and I were in Providence, we established a Peer Assistance and Review Panel co-chaired by the Vice President of the PTU and a high-ranking district administrator. However, under the current law, even when the panel unanimously agreed that a teacher had not improved and should be referred to HR for dismissal, the union was obligated to go through all of the due process steps outlined in law. This was time consuming, expensive, and discouraging to the teachers and administrators who had contributed their time and expertise to developing Peer Assistance and Review.

The second reform requires basing teacher lay-offs on criteria in addition to seniority so that strong teachers and strong school communities can be maintained in the service of students.

Section Three of the bill outlines important expectations for governance responsibilities of the Providence School Board, the Providence School Department, and the City of Providence once the schools return to local control. Meeting these expectations is vitally important because the Hopkins report found that "in the face of the current governance structure, stakeholders understandably expressed little to no hope for serious reform" (Hopkins, p. 3).

Passing S-2934 would represent an important step in removing legislative constraints to the improvement of Providence schools and addressing the barriers identified in the Hopkins report that served as the rationale for the takeover of the Providence schools. Please pass this legislation so that we can stop doing the same thing over and over again and better serve the students and families of Providence.

Respectfully submitted by

Susan F. Lusi
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