



Testimony Re: House Bill 7127, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education - Governor's FY 2027, FY 2026 Revised and Capital Budgets & Articles 6 and 7

Senate Finance Committee

April 16, 2026

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Over the years, Rhode Island has taken several steps to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality education they need to **succeed in school, career, and life.**

We would like to voice our support for elements of the Governor's proposed FY2027 Budget for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. We are in support of the \$2M allocated to Learn365RI initiatives and activities related to the program goals of improving attendance, increasing reading and math scores, and supporting FAFSA completion. We are in strong support of the portion of that funding allocated to the Rhode Island Afterschool Network (\$100,000). High-quality, organized after-school programs improve the supervision and safety of youth, promote positive social skills, and can improve student achievement. Quality out-of-school time programs provide engaging activities that are intentionally designed to promote youth development and are taught by trained, dedicated instructors who work effectively with youth. Youth who participate consistently show improved competence, caring, and connections. We need to invest in these programs so we can expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs and ensure their sustainability by providing the adequate wages needed to retain caring, competent staff who support youth.

Article 6 of the Governor's proposed FY2027 budget also includes a ballot initiative for a \$50M general obligation bond to finance the creation of new career and technical education programs and improvements to existing programs across Rhode Island. We support equitable access to high-quality career and technical education for students to receive the academic and hands-on learning opportunities to prepare them for high-wage, high-skill, and high-demand careers.

We also want to thank the General Assembly leadership and the Finance Committee for all your hard work to establish the education funding formula through legislation, to ensure that it is fully funded, and to seek

improvements to the formula to better meet the needs of Rhode Island students. In 2010, the General Assembly enacted the state's first education funding formula which was based on five key principles – equity, adequacy, predictability, accountability, and efficiency. More recent improvements included important changes in how the needs of Multilingual Learners are addressed, which helped our state improve its grade for equity in funding in the Education Law Center's 2025 [Making the Grade report](#). However, we think that now is the time to look at the entire funding formula rather than just tinkering around the edges. Earlier this year, the Blue Ribbon Commission organized by the Rhode Island Foundation released a report, [Equalizing Opportunity: Creating a Fair and Transparent Funding System for Rhode Island's Public Schools](#). I sat on this Commission, and we support the recommendations included in the report.

Meeting the Education Needs of Low-Income Students

Children in poverty are more likely to attend schools that lack resources and have fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. And as a result, on average, low-income students have lower levels of academic achievement than their peers, a gap that has not narrowed in the past 50 years. Currently, [44 states](#) and D.C. have policies that provide increased funding for low-income students, whether through additional dollars for students living in poverty or by additional funding for districts with concentrated poverty. Of these, 19 provide increased funding both for each individual student from a low-income household and based on the concentration of low-income students in the district.

Rhode Island's education funding formula includes two essential elements that support students in low-income families and communities.

1. The education funding formula provides a core amount of funding per student, and for low-income students a **student success factor** currently equal to 40% of this core amount is added, recognizing that it costs more to educate a student from a low-income family.
2. The funding that comes from the state versus the local community is based on **local fiscal capacity (i.e., the property tax base) and concentrated poverty**, so the state share is higher in low-income communities.

Article 7 of the Governor's proposed FY 2027 budget modifies the education aid funding formula by increasing the student success factor from 40% to 43%. **We greatly appreciate Governor McKee's proposal to include \$14.2M to support this change.** We support this proposal, and in fact, we would recommend that the student success factor be even higher, given the additional needs of low-income students and evidence from studies that show such students may require as much as 2-3 times more funding. Maryland has the highest student poverty weight in the country, providing students from low-income backgrounds with 86% more funding.

The method used to identify students in poverty is also crucial, as insufficient methods of identification can lead to an undercount of students in poverty. Maryland currently uses both enrollment in Medicaid and other state benefits as well as free and reduced-price lunch enrollment to identify students from low-income backgrounds.

The Blue Ribbon Commission proposes an additional weight of 50% for each student who would qualify for federal free or reduced-price meals. It also recommends a few strategies for identifying these students, including using the state's income tax system or direct certification based on eligibility for a broad set of public benefits (e.g., Medicaid, SNAP, etc.).

The Blue Ribbon Commission proposes many other improvements to the state's funding formula, including:

- Accounting for the full cost of education in the funding system and sharing those costs more equitably
- Tailoring educational costs per student more directly
- Requiring local contributions in line with a municipality's ability to pay
- Increasing fiscal responsibility, reporting, and strategic management

We hope you will review the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations in more detail and look at how the budget could support these recommendations. We stand ready to help. Thank you for your hard work to ensure that our state's education funding formula meets the needs of Rhode Island students and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.