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May 19, 2026

The Honorable Louis P. DiPalma  
Chair, Senate Committee on Finance  
Rhode Island Senate  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Subject: Senate Bill 2094 - The Onward We Learn Scholarship Act

Dear Chair DiPalma,

The Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, (RIOPC), recognizes that affordability is a significant barrier to entry, persistence, and completion of higher education programs. The burden of increasing attendance costs and student debt makes higher education more and more inaccessible for many Rhode Island students. Higher education plays a critical role in innovation, economic and social mobility, and workforce development. RIOPC is committed to growing financial resources and support services that Rhode Island students need for postsecondary success. RIOPC is focused on the effectiveness of affordability mechanisms for students seeking a postsecondary education and whether these mechanisms promote and expand postsecondary attainment.

RIOPC is the recipient of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant. Onward We Learn is the sub-recipient of this seven-year, \$33.6 million grant. Rhode Island GEAR UP significantly increases the number of economically disadvantaged students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. This program funds academic support, social and emotional development, college and career exploration, postsecondary preparation, and postsecondary scholarships for students in traditional public middle and high schools in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Newport school districts; in three high-need schools in Cranston; and select public charter schools in these communities. The program also serves students in their first year of postsecondary education for those attending in-state public institutions of higher education. Additionally, Onward We Learn is the recipient of a \$455,000 State Designated Grant. This grant is intended to support the operations of Onward We Learn.

While RIOPC appreciates the intent of this legislation to maximize available resources for students, the mechanism outlined in the bill veers from the appropriations process in Rhode Island

in two important ways. First, this legislation circumvents one of the legislature's most essential functions to annually evaluate priorities and allocate funds in a transparent way each fiscal year. Here, funds originally designated for two statutory scholarships, Hope and Promise, are applied to another unrelated program without an annual legislative analysis and a separate appropriation step.

Secondly, the bill contains detailed directions for program authorization, conditional fund transfers, specific payment procedures, and instructions regarding vouchers and timing of disbursement. By doing so, this legislation removes certain disbursement responsibilities from RIOPC, an office with a mission to expand postsecondary opportunities for all Rhode Island students by focusing on the effectiveness of affordability mechanisms for students seeking a postsecondary education and whether these mechanisms truly promote and expand postsecondary attainment.

These observations are offered to ensure appropriate development of increased postsecondary access and opportunity for Rhode Island students. I appreciate the committee's consideration and request that no action be taken on this legislation at this time.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Shannon W. Gilkey".

Shannon W. Gilkey, Ed. D.  
Commissioner of Postsecondary Education

Cc: The Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Finance  
The Honorable Hanna M. Gallo