

ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

**TESTIMONY ON 26-S 2555,
RELATING TO EDUCATION – THE SUPPORT
AND ACCESS TO BILINGUAL EDUCATION ACT
May 19, 2026**

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this legislation which would allocate funding to establish a bilingual education support fund within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to encourage the implementation of dual language programs. This legislation also seeks to support and expand teaching certifications for bilingual dual language and world language teachers in Rhode Island.

A student is considered a multilingual learner (MLL) if the language they speak at home is a language other than English. According to the National Center for Education Studies, Rhode Island has a rapidly growing MLL population.¹ Over the last decade, the number of MLL students in Rhode Island has nearly doubled.² As of the 2022-2023 school year, 13% of students statewide were considered MLL students.³ Over 40% of students in Rhode Island’s urban districts speak a language other than English at home.⁴

Despite this growth, only 8% of multilingual learners are currently enrolled in dual language programs.⁵ Dual language programs allow a student to keep speaking their native language at school while they learn English. This differs from the English as a Second Language (ESL) model, where students are immersed in an English-speaking classroom, and pulled out by ESL teachers to work either one-on-one or in a small group on English. This fund would assist school districts in implementing or improving dual language programs so that students are encouraged to speak their ancestral languages while also learning English.

MLLs often face systemic barriers outside of the classroom. MLL students are more likely to be lower-income, attend high-poverty schools, and lack access to services that improve English

¹ <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners-in-public-schools>

² The number has increased by 85% in 10 years. https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/multilingual-learners_fb2024.pdf

³ 18,065 students; https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/multilingual-learners_fb2024.pdf

⁴ https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/multilingual-learners_fb2024.pdf

⁵ <https://multilingualri.org/what-we-do/policy-priorities/#support-and-access-to-bilingual-education-act-sabe>

proficiency.⁶ Students facing these complicated issues should not have to additionally worry about understanding course materials in a language they are still learning.

Notably, Rhode Island faces a shortage of certified bilingual and world language teachers. Encouraging more streamlined certifications will help address this gap by removing barriers for teaching students and educators, who have been historically underrepresented in education because of systemic or economic barriers. Investing in a diverse and linguistically talented faculty will ensure Rhode Island students receive instruction that recognizes their ancestral languages and cultural identities, and will better encourage their participation in the school setting.

Thank you for considering our views.

⁶ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/DLL-FactSheet-US-FINAL.pdf>