

## Testimony in Support of S-2555

May 19, 2026

Dear Chairman DiPalma and Members of the Committee,

My name is Erin Papa; I am a product of Rhode Island public schools from K through PhD, current resident of Providence, multilingual engineer and language teacher educator, and director of the Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island. I am writing to urge passage of **Senate Bill 2555**, the Support and Access to Bilingual Education Act (SABE Act).

This bill (S-2555) is the combination of bills we have worked on for the past eight years, intentionally revised with input from our partners in educator preparation, community-based organizations, LEAs, teachers unions, higher education, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner. ***S-2555 would provide the long-term, sustainable commitment necessary to grow and sustain high-quality dual language bilingual education programs and prepare the educators needed to staff them, with a focus on the 11 districts serving the vast majority of multilingual learners in our state.*** Over the years, we have seen piece-meal investments, with a grant program here, and a committed superintendent there, only to return to square one when leadership changes. With SABE, we are demanding more; SABE reflects the long-term planning, partnerships, and commitment necessary for a school district to support meaningful language development among its students and the up-front investment necessary to develop a multilingual educator workforce of adults in Rhode Island who are ready to step into these roles.

Three years ago, with the partnership and leadership of former Senator Sandra Cano and Representative Morales, we were able to secure an investment from the General Assembly of a portion of Rhode Island Reconnect funds to support the preparation of multilingual educators. With these funds set to expire in September, passage of S-2555 is urgently needed to sustain the work we have begun to prepare the multilingual educator workforce our state needs.

The RI Department of Labor and Training (DLT), in the [DLT Occupational Outlook 2032](#), projects nearly 30,000 (27,951) openings in Educational Instruction & Library Occupations by 2032 – that's just 6 years away! We have an opportunity and responsibility today to invest in the preparation of multilingual educators to ensure all students have pathways to become bilingual, biliterate, and cross-culturally competent. Currently RIDE educator vacancy data (<https://ecert.ride.ri.gov/vacancy>) shows 206 vacancies. This means that *around 4,532 students, on average, are without a teacher* and many more have teachers who are not yet fully certified

(on Emergency or Expert Residency Certification). Our Rhode Island students deserve better. Our communities deserve better. Our state and economy deserve better. We must pass S-2555 this year!

Rhode Island updated its MLL Regulations last year for the first time in 17 years. This needed change now prioritizes dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs for MLLs, the most effective program model. In order to serve all 20,000+ MLLs in DLBE, we will need at least 700 more Bilingual Dual Language and World Language certified teachers and 700 ESOL partner teachers in the next 5-10 years.

With Rhode Island Reconnect (OPC) support over the past 2.5 years, we have already graduated 20 new language educators (with many more in the pipeline), 89% of whom live in one of the 11 high-incidence districts and reflect the demographics of our student population. RI Reconnect has addressed 561 unique barriers for multilingual adults pursuing educator certification. This past October, with initial support from the Rhode Island Foundation's Catalyst Grant Program and our partnership with OPC/RI Reconnect, we launched PRIME, our Preparing Rhode Island's Multilingual Educators initiative. Since the launch of PRIME, over 200 multilingual Rhode Islanders have completed our PRIME interest form as their first step on the pathway to becoming certified educators. Over half of these have already taken the next step to meet with our PRIME Navigator and begin their pathway. ***The PRIME candidate pool is exceptionally qualified and ready to step into RI classrooms, but need support.*** With SABE's modest investment, we will ensure that these multilingual Rhode Islanders are financially supported, from evaluation of their credentials and support in developing their English proficiency, to support with educator certification coursework and Praxis testing.

In a recent webinar I co-facilitated with the Annenberg Institute and MABE (Multistate Association for Bilingual Education, NE) on implementing high-quality dual language programs for superintendents and district leaders, ***staffing was the number one challenge cited to starting and sustaining these programs.***

As a graduate of the [URI International Engineering Program](#), with degrees in German and Civil Engineering, I know firsthand the importance and impact of professional multilingual skills in the global and local workplace. I have chosen to use my languages and further education to ensure more Rhode Islanders have access to long-term language learning opportunities, and I am still directly connected with hundreds of URI IEP alumni who are using their language skills daily to lead global teams, making a greater economic impact because of them. ***Education systems around the world prepare students to become proficient in 2-3 languages at a minimum; they start early and continue throughout their studies*** – as they are designed based

on research and best practices in language acquisition. We, too, can ensure that our students have the same opportunities as my friends' children in Germany, Italy, and China, and are ready to compete on a global stage by passing the SABE Act today and committing to developing and sustaining high-quality language programs in our public schools.

We must invest in multilingual educator preparation to ensure that all students have access to fully-certified educators who are prepared to teach in dual language bilingual education programs, the most effective program model for multilingual learners and non-multilingual learners alike. Rhode Island students will be prepared to earn the Gold Seal of Biliteracy and to enter any career they choose, fully bilingual and biliterate.

In summary, the SABE Act (S-2555):

1. Directly helps fill vacant teacher positions in Rhode Island
2. Long-term helps multilingual and non-multilingual students meet employers' needs
3. Ensures a thriving RI economy

I urge you to move S-2555 for passage this year. Thank you for your consideration and support.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erin L. Papa".

Erin L. Papa, Ph.D.

Resident of Providence, 02909

Senate District 7