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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2555 - The Support and Access to Bilingual Education

Senate Finance Committee

May 19, 2026

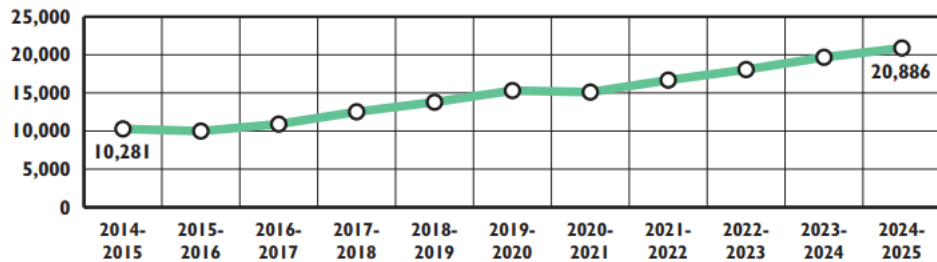
Jessica Vega, Senior Advocacy and Community Engagement Manager

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Senate Bill 2555 and thank Senator McKenney for sponsoring and Senators Ciccone, Vargas, Tikoian, Britto, Gu, Murray, and Acosta for co-sponsoring. This bill would allocate \$950,000 to create a bilingual education support fund housed within the state's elementary and secondary education department. It would also outline how the Bilingual Education Support and Access Act would be put into practice across school districts, community organizations, and colleges and universities that receive its funding.

Rhode Island's multilingual learner (MLL) student population continues to grow rapidly. **During the 2024-2025 school year, 20,886 students, or 16% of Rhode Island's total student population, were multilingual learners.** This represents a 103% increase since the 2014-2015 school year. Rhode Island also experienced the highest growth rate of multilingual learners in the nation between 2010 and 2020.



**Multilingual Learners, Rhode Island,
2014-2015 Through 2024-2025 School Years**



In Rhode Island MLL students speak 106 different languages. Spanish is the most commonly spoken language, accounting for 81% of multilingual learners. The growing linguistic diversity of our state is a tremendous strength and reflects the rich cultural backgrounds of Rhode Island's children and families.

Research consistently shows that high-quality dual language programs improve academic achievement, graduation rates, school engagement, and long-term outcomes for multilingual learners and monolingual students alike. **MLLs enrolled in dual language programs are more likely to achieve English proficiency than students enrolled in English-dominant programs.**

In addition to strengthening academic outcomes, bilingualism and multilingualism provide important workforce and economic advantages in an increasingly global economy.

Despite the growing number of multilingual learners in Rhode Island, access to high-quality dual language programs remains limited. During the 2024-2025 school year, bilingual and two-way dual language programs were only offered in the Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence school districts, as well as at Nuestro Mundo Public Charter School and the International Charter School. Currently, only 8% of MLL students are enrolled in dual language programs. Many families across Rhode Island continue to lack access to these programs. SB 2555 prioritizes districts with a “high incidence” of multilingual learners—defined as those enrolling 250 or more MLL students, or where MLLs make up 20% or more of total enrollment—encouraging these districts to launch or expand high-quality bilingual and dual language programs aligned with state standards.

One of the greatest barriers to expanding bilingual education is the shortage of bilingual and dual language educators. **In October 2025, only 1% (122) of Rhode Island public school teachers and instructional coordinators held an active Bilingual, Dual Language, or English to Speakers of Other Languages certification.** SB 2555 directly addresses this challenge by investing in bilingual educator certification pathways, expanding partnerships with higher education institutions and community organizations, and helping educators access the financial support needed to obtain certification.

Importantly, this bill would create stable, recurring funding beginning in FY2027 to support implementation of dual language programs and strengthen the bilingual educator pipeline statewide. By allocating \$300,000 to support dual language program implementation in public school districts and \$600,000 to expand certification pathways for bilingual dual language and world language educators. Up to \$50,000 may be used for administration, with any unused administrative funds reverting to program support, ensuring the vast majority of funding reaches students and educators directly.

This bill is not only an education bill, it is also an economic development and workforce investment strategy. Rhode Island’s future workforce will increasingly depend on multilingual and multicultural competence, and investing in bilingual education helps prepare students to succeed in a diverse and interconnected world.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT was pleased to serve on the Blueprint for Multilingual Learner (MLL) Success Team convened by the Rhode Island Department of Education alongside dedicated students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders to identify, implement, and sustain more effective policies and practices for MLL students in Rhode Island. This bill aligns with the Blueprint’s strategic plan to secure and fund evidence-based, sustained, and purposeful MLL professional learning for all educators and leaders across and within systems and expanding high-quality dual language programs.

We respectfully urge the committee to support SB 2555 and continue investing in policies that strengthen educational opportunity and long-term success for Rhode Island’s multilingual learners and families.

Thank you for your consideration.