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May 2026

Testimony before the Rhode Island Senate Finance Committee:

Good afternoon, my name is Deborah Catamero, Board member for Advocates for COLA Restoration and Pension Reform. I am retired from Providence Schools where I worked as a teacher and Administrator for 28 years. My testimony today is focused on reviewing briefly- what was, and now what must occur to rectify the travesty of RISRA. The reversal of this act is vital to the education and teaching community however, just as relevant and important to all retired and current State employees and MERS workers. The negativity that currently surrounds the political climate of our State is embarrassing. A 76% disapproval rating for our Governor. The state's failure to address infrastructure and cost of living concerns.

It's no surprise that Rhode Island is struggling to attract and retain qualified state workers, municipal employees, and educators. While the private sector offers higher salaries, Rhode Island **public service** no longer offers the primary benefit that once balanced the scales: **retirement security**.

With Massachusetts and Connecticut less than an hour away, educators are exiting Rhode Island in droves, specifically with younger residents. Currently, in some of our school districts, teachers don't have access to Social Security therefore reducing their income even further upon retirement. In March of 2025, the Governor raised his advisors' salaries by \$10,000 to "stay competitive" while ignoring the benefits of those in the classroom, he sent a clear message: **the students and teachers are not the priority. Make no mistake, workers heard the message loud and clear. They are leaving the state!** This shameful climate of broken trust, the mismanagement of resources, and the deep skepticism toward our leadership cannot be allowed to define the legacy we leave behind. Advocates for COLA Restoration and Pension Reform are fighting for the people hurting most: our retirees. These individuals entered professions that promised a stable, dignified retirement with a pension that included a guaranteed COLA. Most of the Retirees we represent are in their 60s and 70s, and cannot return to work to make up for inflation due to the loss of the COLA, nor should they have to. With skyrocketing inflation, the cost of fuel, electricity, and groceries at an all time high, our frozen pension quickly became a devastation. Prior to 2009, our retirement was predictable. Pensions were based on a three-year high average which provided up to 80% of our salary after 35 years. We believed in the system and dedicated our lives to serving our state and communities. In 2015 a settlement was reached without a trial and without a "fair" vote. In fact, 95% of the ERSRI membership never had a say in this outcome which was officially a "game changer. That alone should NEVER have happened, we were blindsided! The people of Rhode Island look to your leadership to rectify past inequities and

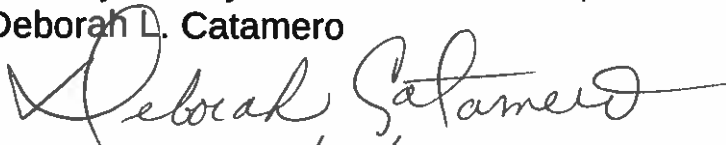
ensure a stable, fair future for all. We are here today, appealing to YOU, our elected officials who have a fiduciary and ethical duty to act in the best interest of the people you represent. You were elected to be the voice of the people. This is a test of that representation.

**Conclusion:**

This is no longer a budgetary argument—it is a profound moral crisis. The long-term suspension of the COLA has already resulted in a staggering loss of over 40% in purchasing power for our retirees. What has happened to our most dedicated, and now most fragile, Rhode Islanders—the elderly—demonstrates a failure of priorities.

We urgently call upon you to support Bill S2818 for the reinstatement of the COLA and fulfill the contractual promises made to those who spent their lives serving the people of Rhode Island. Restoring integrity to the pension system is the only way to ensure that public service is met with the dignity and security that was guaranteed. Beyond rectifying the past, this will be an essential step in rebuilding trust with the next generation. If we wish to lead RI into a prosperous future, we must demonstrate to a capable qualified workforce that our state is a place where professional dedication is honored, not abandoned. **Senators, we now appeal to you** to end this injustice and send a clear signal that Rhode Island values its workers, both past and future. Please vote to support Bill S2818.

Thank you for your time and service,  
Deborah L. Catamero



5/14/2026

Deborah Catamero