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## Testimony Re: Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner- RI Reconnect

### House Finance Committee

March 23, 2023

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to support elements of the Governor's FY2024 Proposed Budget for the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RIOPC) related to the Rhode Island Reconnect program.

RI Reconnect is a highly effective support program managed by RIOPC and created in partnership with the Department of Labor and Training in 2020. RI Reconnect helps meet the needs of adult students returning to school by connecting them to a network of educational navigators and guides as they return to school or job training. Between 2020 and 2030, jobs requiring a postsecondary education degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education. Yet, only 37% of Rhode Island adults ages 25 and 64 have a bachelor's degree or higher. In addition, between 2017 and 2021, the unemployment rate for Rhode Islanders **without a high school diploma was 10.4%, compared to 6.5% for those with a high school degree and 3.1% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher.**

**Education Outcomes, by Race and Ethnicity, Rhode Island**

	ALL RACES	ASIAN*	BLACK	HISPANIC	NATIVE AMERICAN	WHITE
3rd Grade Students Meeting Expectations in Reading	40%	53%	24%	23%	26%	52%
3rd Grade Students Meeting Expectations in Math	25%	39%	10%	11%	11%	35%
Four-Year High School Graduation Rates	84%	88%	82%	77%	76%	88%
Immediate College Enrollment Rates	59%	69%	47%	45%	47%	67%
% of Adults Over Age 25 With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher	35%	54%	24%	16%	15%	37%

Sources: *Third Grade Students Meeting Expectations in Reading and Math* data are from the Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, 2021. *Four-Year High School Graduation Rates* data are from the Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2021. *Immediate College Enrollment Rates* data are from the Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2021. *Adult Educational Attainment* data are from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2016-2020, Tables B15003, C15002A, C15002B, C15002C, C15002D & C15002I. All Census data refer only to those individuals who selected one race and Hispanic or Latino also may be included in any of the race categories. +Data for Asian and Pacific Islander students is not disaggregated by ethnic group. National research shows large academic disparities across Asian ethnic groups.

In Rhode Island, Native American, Hispanic, and Black students are less likely to graduate from high school within four years and are less likely to immediately enroll in college than white or Asian students. Gaps in college enrollment are particularly

large for four-year college enrollment. Many students and adults, especially those in low-income families, face barriers to college enrollment and success, such as insufficient academic preparation, difficulty navigating the application and financial aid processes, and the high cost of college. Disparities in immediate college enrollment and college attainment by income and race have increased significantly because of the pandemic, jeopardizing the equity gains of the previous years.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT urges your support for the RI Reconnect Program. Reconnecting individuals to postsecondary education will have a significant positive impact on Rhode Island's economy and workforce. We particularly support the Office of Postsecondary Commissioner's commitment to ensuring OPC programs address inequalities experienced by Black, Indigenous, People of Color and low-income individuals from Rhode Island's most diverse communities who are most in need of educational and economic advancement.

Thank you for the leadership the General Assembly has shown in supporting the autonomy of young people and for the opportunity to testify today.