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Testimony Re: Senate Bill No.77 Regarding The Rhode Island Hope Scholarship

Senate Finance Committee

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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 voice our support for Senate Bill 77. This bill would establish the Rhode Island Hope Scholarship, providing qualified graduating high school students with two years of free tuition and fees at Rhode Island College. We want to thank Senator Pearson for sponsoring and Senators Gallo, DiPalma, Zurier, Murray, Mack, Valverde, and Cano for co-sponsoring.

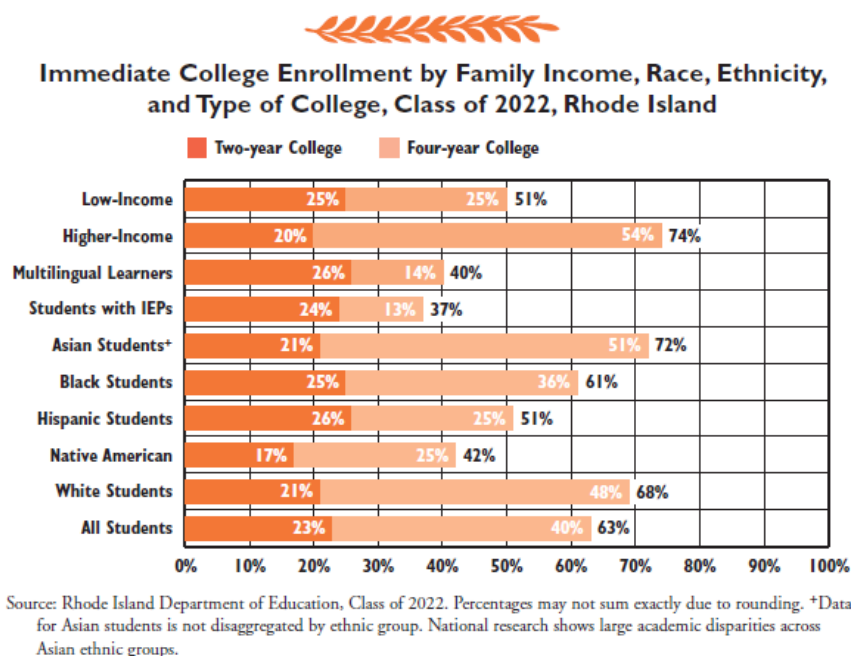
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is the lead convener of the Rhode Island Alliance for College and Career Readiness. The Alliance was established in 2017 to raise awareness about the connection between college and career readiness, individual students' success, and our state's economic prosperity. The Alliance also identifies and advocates for legislative and regulatory changes and budgetary investments needed to increase college and career readiness and access and to address racial, ethnic, and income disparities.

We support this proposal because increasing the percentage of Rhode Islanders with a college degree is vital to the future of our young people and our state's economy. Between 2021 and 2031, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education, yet only 37% of Rhode Island adults ages 25 to 64 have a bachelor's degree or higher. Between 2017 and 2021 in Rhode Island, adults with high school diplomas were three times as likely to be unemployed as those with bachelor's degrees or higher, and the median annual income for adults with high school diplomas was \$38,638, compared to \$60,216 for adults with bachelor's degrees, making college attainment important for economic stability and mobility and generation changing for students from low-income families.

Many students, especially low-income students, face barriers to college enrollment and completion, such as insufficient academic preparation, difficulty navigating the application and financial aid processes, and the high cost of college. Sixty-seven percent of Rhode Island students who graduated from high school in the Class of 2019 immediately enrolled in college. However, **there are significant gaps in college access, particularly four-year college enrollment, between low- and higher-income students and by race, ethnicity, language status, and disability.**

After increasing when the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship was made available, the college enrollment rate declined during the COVID-19 pandemic from 67% for the Class of 2019 to 61% for the Class of 2020 and back up to 63% for the Class of 2022. There continue to be large gaps in college access, particularly four-year college enrollment. For example, in the past few years, the number of low-income students enrolling in a four-year institution dropped from 29% in 2018 to 25% in 2022. In contrast, 54% of high-income students are

enrolled in a four-year institution. **Rhode Island students, especially our low-income students, need a four-year option.**



The Rhode Island Hope Scholarship will likely increase the percentage of low-income students and Students of Color enrolling at Rhode Island College and make a four-year college experience accessible.

College completion is just as important as college enrollment. In Rhode Island, there are large gaps in college completion between low-income and higher-income students. Forty-two percent of low-income Rhode Island public school students who enrolled in a two- or four-year college in 2014 earned a college diploma within six years, compared to 75% of higher-income students. There were also large disparities in college completion by race and ethnicity, language status, and disability.

Students who receive financial aid generally have lower dropout rates than non-aided students. But dropout rates vary depending on the amount and timing of student financial aid. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT urges the Committee to consider revisions to this bill that would allow students who completed two years of study at the Community College of Rhode Island and utilized the Pell Grant to transfer to Rhode Island College and remain eligible for the Rhode Island Hope Scholarship. This would be an equitable approach to addressing the financial barriers to college completion among low-income students and could help to maximize the impact of the federal Pell grant.

We also urge the committee to consider a revision to this bill that would allow students with disabilities to participate in the Rhode Island Hope Scholarship program with reasonable accommodations.

Affordability is not the only barrier to increasing Rhode Island's college enrollment and completion rates, but it is essential. Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown in investing in children from birth through college and investing in the education and training of our state's workforce and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.