

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: Article 3 Re: The Rhode Island Promise Scholarship
Senate Finance Committee
March 30, 2017
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director

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 Article 3 of the budget. This article would create the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship and guarantee two years of free tuition and fees at Rhode Island's public universities. Students would be eligible to receive a scholarship at Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) immediately after high school graduation or at Rhode Island College (RIC) or University of Rhode Island (URI) beginning in their junior year.

The Rhode Island Promise Scholarship would cover the cost of two years of tuition and mandatory fees after the student receives federal and other financial aid available to that student. Each student would only be eligible to receive one scholarship, so they could not receive scholarships for both two years at CCRI and two years at RIC or URI. In order to be eligible, students would have to complete their high school diploma or equivalency before reaching age 19 and complete the FAFSA. Students would have to enroll at CCRI the fall after graduating from high school and would have to enroll full time. Students at RIC and URI would have to be enrolled full time, have a declared major, have accumulated a minimum of 60 credits, and maintain a minimum GPA of 2.0.

The projected cost is \$10 million in FY 2018. Once fully implemented, the full cost is projected to be \$30 million.

We strongly 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.

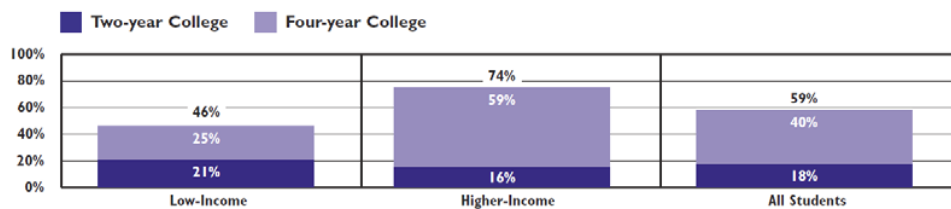
By 2020, 71% of jobs in Rhode Island will require post-secondary education beyond high school, and yet only 34% of Rhode Island adults between the ages of 25 and 64 have a bachelor's degree or higher and an additional 29% have some college or an associate's degree.

Between 2011 and 2015 in Rhode Island, adults with high school diplomas were almost three times more likely to be unemployed as those with bachelor's degrees or higher. During that same period, the median annual income for adults with high school diplomas was \$31,196, compared to \$51,769 for adults with bachelor's degrees.

Only slightly more than half (59%) of Rhode Island students who graduated from high school in the Class of 2015 immediately enrolled in college, and there are large gaps in college enrollment between low- and higher-income students, particularly four-year college enrollment.

Among Rhode Island students who graduated from high school in 2015, 46% of low-income students immediately enrolled in college, compared to 74% of higher-income students. And while 59% of higher-income students enrolled in a four-year college, only 25% of low-income students enrolled in a four-year college. The provision of Article 3/Promise Scholarships that would provide tuition/fees for the 3rd and 4th years at RIC and URI is likely to increase the percentage of low-income students enrolling in these four-year institutions.

Immediate College Enrollment by District Type and Type of College, Class of 2015, Rhode Island



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2015. Percentages may not sum exactly due to rounding.

The increasing cost of college is a barrier to enrollment for many students, but particularly students from low-income families. While students from families in the top income quintile must pay or finance (even after grant aid) an amount equal to 17% of their family income to attend a four-year college, students from families in the lowest income quintile must pay or finance an amount equal to 76% of their family income to attend a four-year college.

Increasing the education levels of Rhode Islanders will require that we make improvements at all points in the early education to college systems, including increasing access to high-quality preschool, improving K-12 education, implementing research-driven dropout prevention programs, simplifying the college admissions process, making college affordable, and providing student support programs that increase college completion rates.

Affordability is not the only barrier to increasing Rhode Island's college enrollment and completion rates, but it is an important one. The Rhode Island Promise Scholarship is designed to both increase affordability and encourage immediate and full-time college enrollment, two strategies shown to improve college completion rates.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown in investing in children from birth through college and for the opportunity to testify today.