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Testimony Re: Article 11 Regarding the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship and FY2020 Budget- Public Higher Education

Joint Senate Finance and Senate Education Committee

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Mr. Chairman and Madam Chairwoman and members of the Senate Finance and Education Committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for key elements of the proposed budget for Public Higher Education.

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, the success of individual students, and the economic prosperity of our state. The Rhode Island Promise Scholarship Program and student opportunities to participate in advanced coursework such as those offered through dual/concurrent enrollment courses that allow students to earn college credit while in high school will allow us to make progress as a state and ensure that our young people are ready for success in college and careers and have the financial resources they need to enroll in and complete a postsecondary degree.

Article 11

Article 11 would make the current Rhode Island Promise permanent. The current scholarship provides qualified graduating high school students two years of free tuition and fees at Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI). The projected cost of continuing this successful scholarship program would be \$7.9 million in FY 2020. Article 11 would also expand the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship in two important ways:

- (1) **Rhode Island College (RIC):** Expands the RI Promise Scholarship to RIC students in their third and fourth years who have earned a minimum of 60 credit hours and declared a major. Students who have previously received a scholarship to the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) would not be eligible. The projected cost of this expansion would be \$3.3 million, including \$2.4 million for scholarship awards and \$900,000 to support services at RIC.
- (2) **Adult Students:** Expands the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship to adult students ages 25 and older pursuing degrees and certificates from CCRI beginning in the fall of 2019. Students would be required to complete at least 18 credit hours per year, maintain a 2.5 grade point average, and remain on-track to completing the degree or credential being pursued. The scholarship would fund 60 credit hours over a maximum of four years. The projected cost of this expansion would be \$2.0 million.

By 2020 (next year), 71% of jobs in Rhode Island will require postsecondary education beyond high school, and yet only 47% of Rhode Island adults between the ages of 25 and 64 have an associate degree, bachelor’s degree, or industry-recognized credential.

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.

Rhode Island Promise Scholarship at CCRI

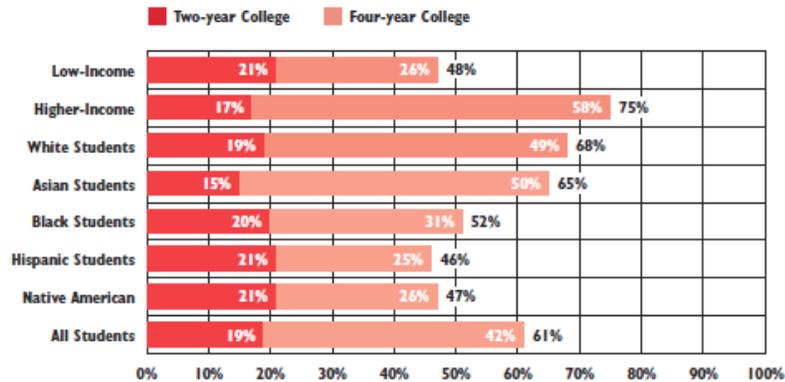
The current Rhode Island Promise Scholarship has been a success. There has been a two-fold (113%) increase in the number of students enrolling at CCRI full-time immediately after high school graduation, and many of these new students are low-income students (143% increase) and students of color (164% increase). The message is getting through that all students can afford to attend college. While many low-income students can attend CCRI for free by accessing a federal Pell Scholarship, the Rhode Island Promise’s clear and easy-to-understand messaging has increased the number of students from all income levels who see college as a path they can pursue and know they have financial support to do so. We urge you to make the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship permanent.

Expansion to Rhode Island College

More than half (61%) of Rhode Island students who graduated from high school in the Class of 2017 immediately enrolled in college, and there were large gaps in college enrollment, particularly four-year college enrollment, between low- and higher-income students and between White students and students of color.

Among Rhode Island students who graduated from high school in 2017, 48% of low-income students immediately enrolled in college, compared to 75% of higher-income students. And while 58% of higher-income students enrolled in a four-year college, only 26% of low-income students enrolled in a four-year college. The expansion of the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship to provide tuition/fees for the third and fourth years at RIC is likely to increase the percentage of low-income students and students of color enrolling at Rhode Island College and we hope that further expansion of the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship in future years will increase enrollment at the University of Rhode Island among low-income students and students as color as well.

Immediate College Enrollment by Family Income, Race, Ethnicity, and Type of College, Class of 2017, Rhode Island



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2017. Percentages may not sum exactly due to rounding.

We urge you to expand the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship to Rhode Island College to make a four-year college experience accessible to more low-income students and students of color.

Expansion to Adult Students

As a children's policy and advocacy organization, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also supports the expansion of the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship to adult students. We know that parental educational attainment has an impact on many aspects of child well-being, including children's health and health-related behaviors, children's access to sufficient educational resources, and the level of education they will ultimately achieve.

Between 2013 and 2017 in Rhode Island, adults with high school diplomas were 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 \$32,734, compared to \$53,036 for adults with bachelor's degrees.

Providing greater access to community college for adults, many of whom are parents, to work toward a degree or certificate that will help them obtain and keep a better job is better for these adults, their children, and our state's economy. For this reason, we urge you to make the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship available to adults ages 25 and older.

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. Article 11 would sustain the successful aspects of the current Rhode Island Promise Scholarship and improve it to increase affordability and equity and encourage immediate and full-time college enrollment, strategies shown to improve college completion rates.

Dual/Concurrent Enrollment

Many students, especially low-income students, 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. States can help address these barriers and improve college access by ensuring that all students have access to advanced coursework including dual and concurrent courses.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT in partnership with Young Voices conducted six focus groups on student-centered learning with students from seven public high schools in Central Falls, Pawtucket and Providence, Rhode Island. Students in these focus groups talked about the value of the course they were able to access through the PrepareRI Dual Enrollment Program. These courses helped students prepare for the rigor of college classes, pursue deeper knowledge in a subject area of interest, and save money by completing college credits before they even graduate from high school.

Although many students reported positive experiences with the Dual Enrollment Program, low-income, minority, special education and male students were less likely to participate than other students.

We commend the General Assembly for its investment in the PrepareRI Dual Enrollment Fund for four consecutive years. We urge the committee to approve the proposed \$500,000 increase in funding to allow more students to earn college credit at their high school or at state public higher education institutions at no cost to them or their families.

No Student Hungry College Provisions

Many students struggle to remain in college because they lack the needed funds and are required to work one or more jobs to pay for college and their living expenses.

We support the Governor's proposal to improve the ability of low-income college students to qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the proposal to include \$325,000 to support the **SNAP Education and Training** program at CCRI, which would provide need-based aid to students enrolled in certain training programs at CCRI to pay for transportation, books, child care, and other non-tuition costs and funds to support a work study program.

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.

