



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**  
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**Testimony Re: Senate Bill 0865 Regarding RI Board of Education Act**

**Senate Education Committee**

**May 15, 2019**

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for elements of Senate Bill 0865. This bill would:

1. Expand the duties of the school principal to include management and supervision of school property, hiring and terminating of all school personnel, control of school facilities and budget, and increase school improvement teams role in school improvement plans and budget.
2. Repeal the appointment of the commissioner of postsecondary education.
3. Requires RI Board of Education to develop an accountability system for districts.
4. Establish an office of school and district accountability within the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Closing unacceptable, wide and persistent gaps for students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities and Multilingual/ English Language Learners must be Rhode Island's most urgent educational priority. In 2018, 40% of Rhode Island third graders met expectations on the *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, English language arts assessment. 26% of low-income third graders met expectations, compared with 56% of higher-income third graders. There were also large achievement gaps by race and ethnicity as well as by English learner and disability status. Reading proficiency in third grade is a key predictor of school success and high school graduation. Research shows that children who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers.

**Third Graders Meeting Expectations on the  
RICAS English Language Arts Assessment, Rhode Island, 2018**

SUBGROUP	
Male Students	36%
Female Students	45%
English Learners	13%
Non-English Learners	44%
Students with Disabilities	9%
Students without Disabilities	46%
Low-Income Students	26%
Higher-Income Students	56%
White Students	50%
Asian Students	44%
Black Students	26%
Hispanic Students	25%
Native American Students	24%
<b>ALL STUDENTS</b>	<b>40%</b>

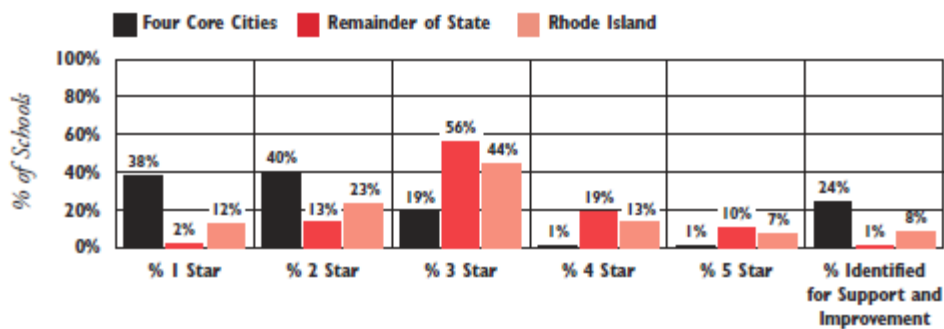
Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS), 2018*. Low-income status is determined by eligibility for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

These gaps persist when eighth grade math skills are reviewed. In Rhode Island in the 2017-2018 school year, 22% of low-income third graders met expectations in math, compared with 50% of higher-income third graders. There also were large achievement gaps by race and ethnicity, with 49% of Asian and 45% of White third graders meeting expectations, compared with 21% of Black, 22% of Hispanic, and 15% of Native American students. This large achievement gap is also seen in eighth-grade results, with 35% of Asian and 31% of White eighth graders meeting expectations, compared with 8% of Black and Hispanic students, and 7% of Native American students. Bold action is needed to address these persistent gaps and provide adequate and equitable education for all Rhode Island students.

Research on school improvement efforts shows that schools can be improved through comprehensive, whole-school reforms. Critical elements of successful school improvement efforts include targeting resources to support the lowest performing schools, giving building leaders more autonomy around spending and hiring, using data-based decision making, developing ways to spread best practices, and engaging the whole community in improvement efforts.

The U.S. Department of Education approved Rhode Island's new accountability system under the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* in 2018. The new system is structured to promote collective responsibility for continuous improvement at all levels of education through the use of measurements to differentiate school performance, a school classification system, and state, district and school report cards.

## Rhode Island School Performance Classifications, 2017-2018 School Year



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, School and District Report Cards, 2017-2018 school year.

In Rhode Island in the 2017-2018 school year, 36 schools (12%) were given a one-star rating, 68 schools (23%) were given a two-star rating, 132 schools (44%) were given a three-star rating, 40 schools (13%) were given a four-star rating, and 21 schools (7%) were given a five-star rating.

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We are pleased that this bill expands tracking and reporting of data not included in Rhode Island's *ESSA* plan. These elements include tracking of the racial composition of teaching and administrative staff and accommodations for English language learners (ELL). However, we have identified a need to review how ELL accommodation as well as other elements of the school accountability sections of this bill support, replicate or change the *ESSA* plan already approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

We were also pleased the proposed bill acknowledges the role after-school learning opportunities provide as a strategy for improving academic outcomes. High-quality, organized after-school and summer programs improve the supervision and safety of youth, promote positive social skills, and, with sufficient dosage, improve student achievement. Quality out-of-school time programs provide engaging activities that are intentionally designed to promote youth development and are taught by trained, dedicated instructors who

work effectively with youth. Youth who participate consistently can show improved competence, caring, and connections.

We have concerns with the proposed elimination of the commissioner of postsecondary education. We acknowledge the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPC) has played an important role in supporting the tracking of college access, enrollment and completion amongst traditional students and adults. The OPC played an important role in managing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Challenge. High School seniors who have completed a FAFSA by May and been accepted to a four-year college are 50% more likely to enroll than students who have not completed their FAFSA. During the 2018-2019 cycle, Rhode Island ranked eighth in the U.S. for the number of high school seniors completing the FAFSA. This proposed bill does not address how these positive efforts will continue without the leadership of the OPC.

In closing, we encourage additional opportunities for increased public understanding of the proposed bill. The recent adoption of the state's *ESSA* plan included several months of planning and input from students, parents and community members throughout the state. It is unclear how the proposed bill supports, enhances or changes these efforts already approved by the US Department of Education.

Thank you to the bill sponsors for the extensive work and effort to improve the educational outcomes for all of Rhode Island's children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

