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Testimony Re: Article 10 Regarding Education

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 its **strong support** for **Article 10, Section 1** related to additional support for **Multilingual Learners** and support to increase the number of **mental health professionals at public schools** and **Article 10, Section 7** related to the **Rhode Island Promise Scholarship**.

School-Based Mental Health Professionals

Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in school, and in the community. Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk for suicide.

In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem; one in ten (9.8%) has significant functional impairment. In Rhode Island more than one-third (36%) of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.

According to the *2019 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, 76% of high school students reported having at least one day in the past month where their mental health was not good. About one in three (32%) Rhode Island high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks that they stopped doing some normal activities and one in seven (15%) reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year. According to the 2020 *SurveyWorks* results, 60% of Rhode Island students in grades 6-12 report stress has interfered with their ability to participate in school.

We strongly support the Governor's proposed expansion of the qualifying expenditures of the School Resource Officer Categorical Aid to include the hiring of new mental health professionals in schools. These investments will help ensure the safety and physical and emotional well-being of our children.

Multilingual Learners (MLL)

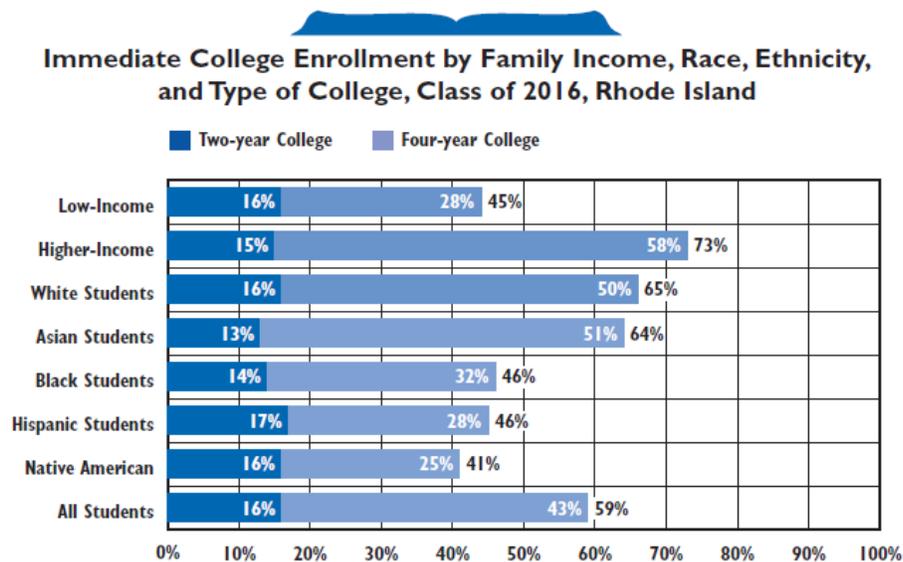
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports an increase of \$2.5 million for Multilingual Learners (formerly known as English Learners) categorical funding, bringing total state funding to \$7.5 million.

Rhode Island Promise

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports Article 10, Section 7. This Article would make the current Rhode Island Promise scholarship program permanent by removing the current provision that the program end with the high school graduating class of 2020, exclude grants awarded by DCYF or the College Crusade from being considered from the last dollar calculations, and expand eligibility to include certificate programs. The current scholarship provides qualified graduating high school students two years of free tuition and fees at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI). The projected cost of continuing this successful scholarship program would be \$7.2 million in FY 2021.

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 Alliance 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.

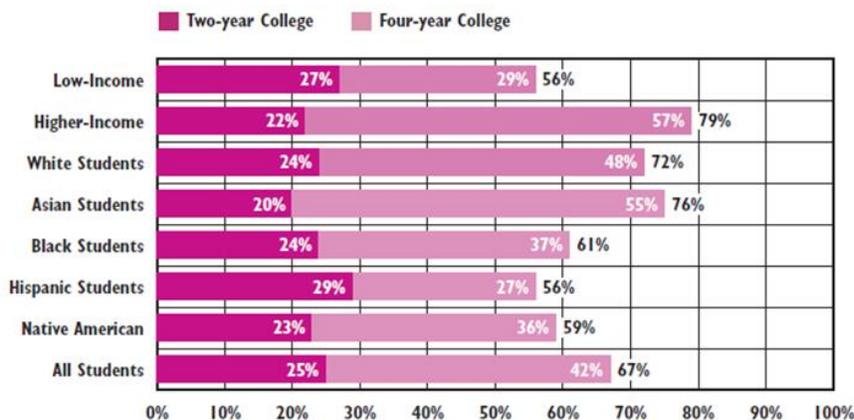
Between 2018 and 2028, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education. Between 2014 and 2018 in Rhode Island, adults with high school diplomas were almost three times more likely to be unemployed as those with bachelor's degrees or higher. Making the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship Program permanent would allow our state to continue to make progress in increasing college access, enrollment, and completion by ensuring that our young people have the financial resources they need to enroll in and complete a postsecondary degree or certificate.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2016. Percentages may not sum exactly due to rounding.



Immediate College Enrollment by Family Income, Race, Ethnicity, and Type of College, Class of 2018, Rhode Island



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2018. Percentages may not sum exactly due to rounding.

The current Rhode Island Promise Scholarship has been a success. The two-year college enrollment rate has increased from 16% for the class of 2016 (before the Rhode Island Promise Scholarship was available) to 25% for the class of 2018 (the most recent data available). During that same time period, the immediate two-year college enrollment rate for low-income students increased from 16% to 27%, from 14% to 24% for Black students, from 17% to 29% for Hispanic students, from 16% to 23% for Native American students, and from 16% to 24% for White students. Although there were gains in immediate college enrollment for all groups, these gains were largest among low-income students and students of color.

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.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to impact economic mobility and have devastating long-lasting effects on children in poverty. Black and Hispanic households are projected to face the greatest increase in poverty, and racial and ethnic disparities may be exacerbated. It is critical to continue efforts to increase college enrollment and completion among these groups so we do not lose equity gains.

Increasing the education levels of Rhode Islanders will require that we make improvements at all points in the early education to college system, including increasing access to high-quality Pre-K, 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. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports Article 10, Section 7 which would sustain the successful aspects of the current Rhode

Island Promise Scholarship and help Rhode Island continue to make progress in increasing postsecondary attainment rates and increase the economic prosperity of the state.

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.

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