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**Testimony Re: Governor's FY 2017, FY 2016 Revised & Capital Budgets,
Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
House Finance Committee
April 12, 2016
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am here today to voice Rhode Island KIDS COUNT's strong support for several key elements of the proposed budget for the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Education Funding Formula

We were pleased to see that the Governor's proposed budget fully funds Year 6 of the implementation of the education funding formula that was enacted by the General Assembly in 2010. We thank the General Assembly leadership and the House Finance Committee for all of your hard work to establish the funding formula through legislation and to ensure that it is fully funded.

Pre-K

When the General Assembly adopted the education funding formula in 2010, you made the wise decision to include Pre-K as a categorical program in the formula with a gradual, ten-year expansion plan so that this critical program can incrementally expand to serve more young children. In doing so, you paid attention to the national research that shows that improved educational outcomes depend on access to high-quality Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K), especially for at-risk students.

Including the 1,391 low-income four-year-olds enrolled in Head Start in Rhode Island and the 594 children enrolled in State Pre-K, approximately 33% of the state's low-income four-year-olds are enrolled in a public preschool program (State Pre-K or Head Start).

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the Governor's FY17 budget proposal to fully fund the early learning/Pre-K categorical program based on the expansion plan that is part of the education funding formula. This expansion, combined with federal Preschool Development Grant funds will allow the State Pre-K program to grow to almost 1,000 seats next year.

English Language Learners (ELLs)

Currently, Rhode Island is one of only four states (others are Delaware, Mississippi, and Montana) with an education funding formula that does not include designated ELL funding. Recent reports, including a 2013 report by the Latino Policy Institute, have noted that Rhode Island's ELL students are among the lowest performing students in the nation as measured by the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*, also known as the Nation's Report Card.

For these reasons, we strongly support the Funding Formula Working Group's recommendations that Rhode Island:

- (1) Consider providing additional financial support for English Language Learners
- (2) Calculate funding to support ELLs based on the number of ELLs in a district

(3) Include reasonable restrictions to ensure that funding is used to benefit ELLs

Article 11 proposes a categorical fund equal to 10% of the core instructional amount be created and distributed to districts based on the number of ELLs they serve and used exclusively to provide “high-quality, research-based services” to ELL students. The Governor’s budget includes \$2.5 million for this new categorical fund for this year as part of a two-year phase-up to a total of \$5.0 million for 2018 and beyond. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports this funding strategy because it would ensure that districts with high proportions of ELL students receive the additional resources they need and that the funds are targeted to address ELL students’ needs.

High-Cost Special Education Students

Effective and appropriate special education services are important for improving long-term outcomes for children and youth with special needs. Article 11 proposes to reduce the threshold for qualifying for high-cost special education funds from five times the core foundation amount to four times. The Governor’s budget includes a \$2.0 million increase in categorical program funds for high-cost special education to support this change.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports this proposal which would increase the resources available to serve students with special education needs and reduce the financial burden on local school districts.

SAT Tests

The Governor’s budget includes \$500,000 to increase SAT participation by paying for PSAT-taking for sophomores and SAT-taking for juniors in public schools. Among students in the Class of 2015, 59% of Rhode Island public school students statewide took the SAT exam, but rates were much lower for some high schools where barely one-third of students took the SAT.

Just yesterday, a report was released that showed that just two out of five working-age adults in Rhode Island hold two- or four-year college degrees, the lowest rate in New England. Investments like this one can help more Rhode Islander students think about and gain entry to higher education, an important goal, since by 2020 71% of jobs in Rhode Island will require post-secondary education beyond high school.

Other Budget Items

In addition to the above-mentioned budget items, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also strongly supports:

- **School Construction:** The Governor’s budget proposal includes \$80.0 million for school housing aid to districts and Article 5 recommends a \$40 million bond to renovate and modernize school buildings. A growing body of research has linked student achievement and behavior to school building conditions and overcrowding. We must ensure that our schools provide the kinds of learning environments that support the health and morale of both staff and students.
- **Dual Enrollment:** The Governor’s budget proposal includes \$1.3 million to continue funding Prepare RI, a dual enrollment initiative that allows qualified students to earn credit at their high schools and at state public higher education institutions, at no cost to students or families.
- **Innovation and Empowerment Fund:** The Governor’s budget proposal includes a \$1.0 million Innovation and Empowerment Fund to provide planning and implementation grants to schools to promote innovation, flexibility, and best practices and to encourage building-level autonomy.

Thank you for your leadership on all of these issues and for the opportunity to testify today.