



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 636 Re: Rhode Island Hope Scholarship
Senate Education Committee
April 28, 2021
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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 Senate Bill 636. This bill would establish the Rhode Island Hope Scholarship which would provide qualified graduating high school students two years of free tuition and fees at Rhode Island College. We want to thank Senator Pearson for his leadership and also thank the other sponsors in the Senate, Chairwoman Cano, Senators Gallo, Lawson, DiMario, and Euer.

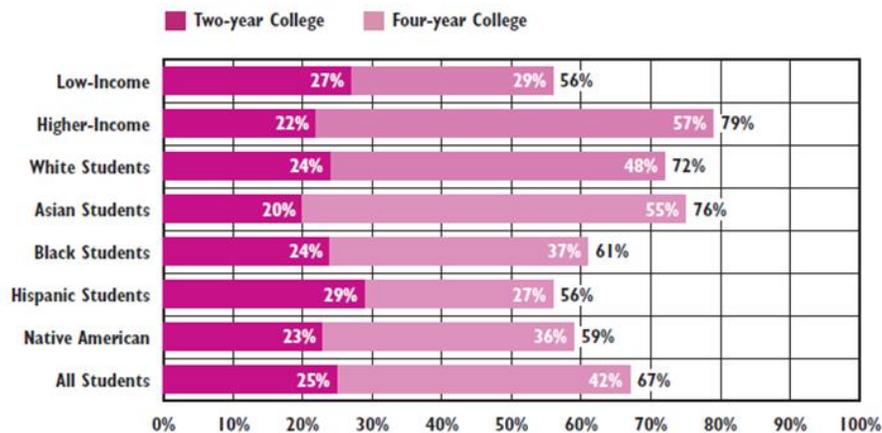
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is the lead convener of the **Rhode Island Alliance for College and Career Readiness**. The Alliance was established in 2017 to raise awareness about the connection between college and career readiness, the success of individual students, and the economic prosperity of our state. 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.

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. Between 2019 and 2029, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education, yet only 36% of Rhode Island adults ages 25 to 64 have a bachelor's degree or higher.

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.



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.

Sixty-seven percent of Rhode Island students who graduated from high school in the Class of 2018 immediately enrolled in college. However, there are large gaps in college access, particularly four-year college enrollment, between low- and higher-income students as well as by race and ethnicity.

Disparities in immediate college enrollment by income and race has increased significantly because of the pandemic, jeopardizing the equity gains of the previous years. Nationally, 76% of households with college-bound children changed their plans for higher education because of the pandemic and 53% of students reported their plans changed because they were no longer able to pay for tuition. The financial stability, academic performance, and educational plans of many college students, especially of Students of Color, were impacted by the pandemic. Black and Hispanic college students were more likely than White college students to report the pandemic impacted their ability to complete their degree.

The Rhode Island Hope Scholarship is likely to increase the percentage of low-income students and Students of Color enrolling at Rhode Island College and make a four-year college experience accessible. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT urges the committee to consider a revision to this bill that would allow students with disabilities to participate in the Rhode Island Hope Scholarship program with reasonable accommodations including part-time study and to consider an income limit as a means of targeting resources to students in greatest financial need.

Affordability is not the only barrier to increasing Rhode Island's college enrollment and completion rates, but it is an important one. 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.