



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: ARPA Proposals in Article 1, Section 16 Related to
Higher Education Academy
Senate Finance Committee
March 31, 2021
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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 support for Article 1, Section 16 which would allocate a total of \$22.5 million in federal ARPA funds from FY 2023 to FY 2027 to establish three Higher Education Academies that will support students ages 16 and older in enrolling in higher education or workforce training programs, provide college readiness coursework, and provide wraparound services.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT was honored to serve on the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner Advisory Committee. This committee convened local, state, and national experts in higher education and workforce development to set priorities for Rhode Island's postsecondary system. Topics of the committee sessions included creating a more prosperous economy in Rhode Island; equity in enrollment, persistence, and affordability; and understanding the needs of today's postsecondary students. The proposed Higher Education Academy is well aligned with the final report and recommendations of the advisory committee.

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 and adults, especially those in low-income families, 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. **Disparities in immediate college enrollment by income and race has increased significantly because of the pandemic, jeopardizing the equity gains of the previous years.**

In Rhode Island, in the class of 2020:

- 61% of students immediately enrolled in college, a decrease of six percentage points from before the pandemic.
- 55% of Black students immediately enrolled in college, a decrease of six percentage points from before the pandemic.
- 48% of Hispanic students immediately enrolled in college, a decrease of eight percentage points.
- 42% of Native American students immediately enrolled in college, a decrease of six percentage points.
- 69% of white students immediately enrolled in college, a decrease of 3 percentage points.

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. The Alliance looks forward to working with the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner to ensure the Higher Education Academy complements the existing work of college access providers and is prepared to meet the needs of students and families most impacted by the pandemic.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT urges your support for the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner's Higher Education Academy proposal with its key focus on supporting Rhode Islanders who, due to the pandemic, have not yet matriculated to postsecondary education or who were not able to complete their postsecondary education. Reconnecting these individuals to postsecondary education will have a significant positive impact on Rhode Island's economy and workforce. We particularly support the Office of Postsecondary Commissioner's commitment to ensuring that the Higher Education Academy will address inequalities experienced by Black, Indigenous, People of Color and low-income individuals from Rhode Island's most diverse communities who are most in need of educational and economic advancement.

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.