



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

Testimony Re: House Bill 7168 Regarding COVID Recovery Plans
House Education Committee

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Paige Clausius-Parks, Senior Policy Analyst

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 the intent of House Bill 7168. This bill would require all school districts to prepare district recovery plans that include strategies and targets to address student academic setbacks and social-emotional needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by September 1, 2022.

I was honored to serve alongside Chair McNamara on the Learning, Equity, and Accelerated Pathways (LEAP) Task Force, which was composed of parents, educators, direct service providers, community organizations, advocates, and policymakers. It was a pleasure to serve with these incredible leaders who are thoughtful and committed partners in advancing education equity in Rhode Island. Our goals were to address ongoing concerns with Rhode Island's learning recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic by assessing the conditions of "learning loss" in the schools and communities across Rhode Island; identifying research-based, high leverage strategies for equitable learning recovery; and identifying priorities and the strategic focus for learning recovery efforts that would align with stimulus funding guidance.

We engaged in critical discussions about the challenges students, parents, and schools faced during the pandemic and the need to utilize this once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink education and dismantle systems that have led to the disparities and inequities in education based on income, race, ethnicity, language status, and disability.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is pleased with the enabling conditions identified in the Task Force [final report](#) that are necessary to meet the urgency of this moment including:

- **Address systemic racial inequities** in Rhode Island's educational system.
- **Center the voices of students and families** in all work across the entire education system.
- Prioritize **cross-sector partnership and intentional collaboration** across Rhode Island to implement collective impact approaches.

These conditions align with the key recommendations in our publication [Youth, Family, and Community-Based Approaches to Equity in Education](#).

We are pleased that social-emotional wellness is elevated in the report and in this bill. Restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive

disciplinary practices are effective approaches for addressing student trauma and help to increase academic outcomes. **Schools that are unequipped to meet the mental health and emotional needs of students during and after the pandemic can perpetuate or introduce new traumas.** School-based mental health professionals have an important role to play in creating and sustaining positive school climates and can improve health outcomes, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement and career preparation, and lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents -- all measures that are critical for a successful and accelerated recovery.

The needs of Multilingual Learners, students with disabilities, and chronically absent students must be prioritized for learning recovery efforts, and **all efforts must use an anti-racist, equity-focused lens.** This should include the expansion of dual language programs and more resources to meet the needs of differently-abled students.

I was fortunate to participate in a small group discussion with U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona about the federal requirements for states and school districts to seek broad public input to develop plans for the use of *American Rescue Plan ESSER* funds. We urge the committee to consider revisions to this bill that would require student, parent, educator, and community input in the development of district recovery plans to align with the federal requirement.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.