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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2571 Re: The College and Career Success for All Students Act

Senate Education Committee

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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 provide information related to S2571 and thank Chair Cano for introducing this legislation and Senators Acosta, DiMario, Gallo, Lawson, Seveney, DiPalma, Kallman, Burke, and Quezada for co-sponsoring. This bill would require all high school seniors to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), or a Rhode Island alternative financial aid application offered through CCRI or complete a waiver to graduate.

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. States can help address these barriers and improve college access by ensuring that all students have access to advanced coursework; take college entrance exams; complete the FAFSA; get adequate counseling; and target financial aid strategically to students with the greatest needs.

High school seniors who have completed a FAFSA by May and been accepted to a four-year college are 50% more likely to enroll than students who have not completed their FAFSA. During the 2020-2021 cycle, 61% of Rhode Island high school seniors completed the FAFSA by June 2020, making Rhode Island fifth in the U.S. for highest FAFSA completion rates.

Louisiana was the first state to adopt a FAFSA completion policy in 2015 resulting in the state's FAFSA completion rate increasing by 26% and nearly eliminating disparities in FAFSA completion rates between low-income and higher-income school districts. Seven additional states (Texas, Illinois, California, Alabama, Colorado, New Hampshire and Maryland) have adopted similar policies.

Currently Tennessee is ranked number one (63%) in FAFSA completion and is often among the top-ranking states annually in the U.S. Tennessee does not have a FAFSA completion policy, but instead has credited its high percentage of high school seniors completing the financial aid application to investments in the state's Promise Scholarship and early FAFSA completion deadlines.

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 has been tracking the adoption of FAFSA completion policies throughout the country and many members have expressed support for efforts that increase FAFSA

completion while also expressing concern about the ability of school districts that serve a high percentage of low-income students and Multilingual Learners to implement such a policy without additional financial and staffing supports. In 2020, the lowest FAFSA completion rates were in Woonsocket (40%), Central Falls (43%), and Pawtucket (45%) compared to 63% in the Remainder of State.

Table 55. College Preparation and Access, Rhode Island

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL GRADE 12 ENROLLMENT OCT. 2019	% OF GRADE 12 STUDENTS PLANNING TO ATTEND COLLEGE, 2020	% OF STUDENTS WHO FILLED OUT THE FAFSA, 2020
Barrington	333	*	70%
Bristol Warren	243	24%	55%
Burrillville	198	64%	56%
Central Falls	196	46%	43%
Chariho	243	64%	67%
Coventry	386	59%	63%
Cranston	873	47%	58%
Cumberland	357	60%	68%
East Greenwich	175	*	68%
East Providence	332	62%	56%
Exeter-West Greenwich	142	57%	70%
Foster-Glocester	179	40%	60%
Johnston	255	54%	59%
Lincoln	228	75%	67%
Middletown	163	62%	64%
Narragansett	105	*	62%
New Shoreham	15	73%	67%
Newport	133	36%	54%
North Kingstown	370	63%	68%
North Providence	266	65%	72%
North Smithfield	128	83%	73%
Pawtucket	508	47%	45%
Portsmouth	254	65%	73%
Providence	1,725	47%	63%
Scituate	98	47%	74%
Smithfield	191	47%	76%
South Kingstown	234	71%	69%
Tiverton	148	67%	62%
Warwick	699	30%	54%
West Warwick	213	53%	58%
Westerly	214	43%	59%
Woonsocket	402	57%	40%
<i>Beacon Charter High School</i>	55	16%	69%
<i>Blackstone Academy</i>	92	66%	75%
<i>Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy</i>	91	35%	80%
<i>Paul Cuffee Charter School</i>	62	*	81%
<i>The Greene School</i>	44	43%	66%
<i>Highlander Charter School</i>	36	36%	58%
<i>RI Nurses Institute Middle College</i>	59	*	68%
<i>Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy</i>	38	100%	58%
<i>Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts</i>	32	94%	100%
<i>Village Green Virtual Public Charter School</i>	38	97%	100%
<i>William M. Davies Jr. Career & Technical Center</i>	185	58%	58%
<i>Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center</i>	184	73%	53%
<i>DCYF</i>	15	NA	NA
<i>Four Core Cities</i>	2,831	48%	55%
<i>Remainder of State</i>	7,178	49%	63%
<i>Rhode Island</i>	10,946	49%	61%

Recommended Changes to Bill Language

The National College Attainment Network, a leader in college access research, policy and advocacy, recommends states considering a FAFSA completion requirement **provide a minimum of one full FAFSA cycle from bill passage before the requirement takes effect, build and provide robust training and support through school counselors and college access advisers and provide regular data-sharing between schools and community-based college access organizations** (e.g., College Crusade, College Visions, etc. in Rhode Island) to allow for targeted FAFSA completion efforts.

We also urge the committee to consider including a provision that requires school districts to report the number of students who have completed FAFSA or the Rhode Island alternative financial aid application or submitted a waiver, and to disaggregate this data by race, ethnicity, disability, and language status to help analyze the equitable implementation of this policy and ensure the intent of this legislation is achieved.

Increasing the percentage of high school students who complete the FAFSA requires strong trusting relationships with families that includes culturally and linguistically appropriate communications about the importance of going to college, supports to help students and families navigate the college application and admissions process, and assistance with the FAFSA verification process.

Improving college access and completion will require Rhode Island to make improvements at all points in the early education to college system, including increasing access to high-quality preschool, implementing research-driven early intervention and dropout prevention programs, aligning the K-12 education system with college demands, making college affordable, and providing student support programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.