



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: H-5238 Rhode Island Student Success Act
House Education Committee
February 24, 2021
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports House Bill 5238. This bill would allow undocumented students who have attended a Rhode Island high school for at least three years, graduated from high school and agreed to take steps to legalize their immigration status to pay the same tuition and fees as Rhode Island residents at the state's public institutions of higher education.

This bill would be consistent with the policy that was unanimously passed by the then Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education in September of 2011 but make this decision more permanent by building it into state law.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 17 states have laws allowing in-state tuition rates for undocumented students who meet eligibility requirements. These states include Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington. Other states (including Rhode Island, Hawaii, Michigan, and Oklahoma) have promulgated policies that allow undocumented students who meet eligibility requirements to pay in-state tuition at some or all schools.

According to a March 2011 report from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, experience from these states suggests that such legislation **does not deprive the states of revenue from students who would otherwise pay out-of-state tuition**. In fact, tuition revenues tend to increase because most of these students would not otherwise be able to attend college. In addition, providing access to in-state tuition to these students helps fully realize the investment already made in these children during the years they were in our state's public elementary, middle, and high schools. This same report also notes that there have been several court challenges to state laws offering in-state tuition to undocumented students, but **no challenge has been upheld in the courts**.

Improving educational opportunities for youth is growing more important every year. Students who see a clear path forward toward higher education and a career perform better in school and are more likely to stay in school and graduate with their classmates. Youth without a college education have an increasingly difficult time entering the labor force and earning sufficient wages to support their families. Undereducated youth are also at risk for being unemployed or underemployed and becoming the next generation of poor families in the state.

The existing policy (and this law) affects a small number of Rhode Island youth. In Fall 2020, seventy-six undocumented students were enrolled at the University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, and the Community College of Rhode Island. For these youth, access to in-state tuition is opening a whole world of opportunities by providing access to higher education and the career and life opportunities that this brings. We urge you to support this bill, which is consistent with existing policy, so that Rhode Island can provide access to an affordable college education for all our young people. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.