Improving Rhode Island’s K-12 Schools: Where Do We Go From Here?
## Abbreviations

- **AYP** – Adequate Yearly Progress
- **BEP** – Basic Education Program
- **BOE** – Board of Education
- **CCSS** – Common Core State Standards
- **CES** – Comprehensive Education Strategy
- **ELA** – English/Language Arts
- **ELL** – English Language Learner
- **ESEA** – Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- **ESSA** – Every Student Succeeds Act
- **ESSER** – Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief
- **FRPL** – Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- **FTE** – Full-Time Equivalent
- **FY** – Fiscal Year
- **IDEA** – Individuals with Disabilities Act
- **IEP** – Individualized Education Program
- **LEA** – Local Education Agency
- **LEAP** – Learning, Equity, and Accelerated Pathways
- **LEP** – Limited English Proficient
- **MAT** – Metropolitan Achievement Test
- **MCAS** – Massachusetts Common Assessment System
- **NAEP** – National Assessment of Educational Progress
- **NECAP** – New England Common Assessment Program
- **NCLB** – No Child Left Behind Act
- **NSRE** – New Standards Reference Exam
- **PARCC** – Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers
- **PPSD** – Providence Public School District
- **PROBE** – Providence Blueprint for Education
- **RICAS** – Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System
- **RIIDE** – Rhode Island Department of Education
- **RIPEC** – Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council
- **SALT** – School Accountability for Learning and Teaching
- **RTTT** – Race to the Top
- **UCOA** – Uniform Chart of Accounts
I. Introduction

It is hard to overstate the importance of public elementary and secondary education to the State of Rhode Island. It is a massive enterprise into which state and local governments expend a major proportion of their limited resources. In fiscal year (FY) 2020, revenues earmarked for elementary and secondary education comprised a quarter (25.1 percent) of state general revenues and over half (52.7 percent) of local revenues in Rhode Island. More than a significant expense, public elementary and secondary education serves a crucial role for the people of Rhode Island and the wellbeing of our state. Nearly 140,000 children currently rely on this system to prepare them for adulthood, and the health of both the state’s economy and its body politic are heavily dependent on the relative success of this venture.²

And yet, for decades Rhode Island’s K-12 system has faced substantial challenges without resolution. Compared to other states, Rhode Island commits among the most resources to its K-12 system—the state’s per pupil expenditures were 12th highest in the country in fiscal year 2020.³ However, based on indicators of student achievement, Rhode Island generally has middling outcomes compared to the nation overall and has underperformed compared to the other states in the New England region. While outcomes for students in Rhode Island overall are relatively low, there are serious and stark gaps in student outcomes across lines of geography, race and ethnicity, and other demographic features including poverty, disability status, and English language proficiency. In Rhode Island, as in the rest of the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic and the related closure of schools only exacerbated these issues, causing sharp declines in student outcomes overall, with particularly negative effects for students belonging to historically disadvantaged subgroups and/or residing in already underperforming districts.

The pandemic, moreover, has seemingly caused a standstill in attempts to enact systemwide education reform. Over the past several decades, there have been a few notable education reform movements in Rhode Island. More recently, the enactment of a package of reform legislation in 2019, and the appointment of a new education commissioner and subsequent takeover of the state’s largest school district, Providence, seemed to signal the beginning of a new period of reform, but the urgent problem of school closures and the forced reliance on remote learning understandably became the near sole focus of education policy beginning in spring 2020 and continuing into 2021. While the public health emergency has subsided and students have long since returned to in-person learning, any remaining momentum behind enacting substantial education reform has not picked up steam, even while the issues which plagued the system before the pandemic have become more acute.

This report addresses this state of inertia head on—providing a level-setting overview and analysis of how the state’s education system has changed in the past few decades and where it stands today. This report recounts both the areas where there have been positive developments, and where the state continues to

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1 State general revenues for K-12 education totaled $999.5 million and local revenues totaled $1.46 billion. RIDE, Uniform Charts of Accounts Data; R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, FY 2021 Budget as Enacted, Section VI: Summary Tables; R.I. Division of Municipal Finance, Municipal Transparency Portal; RIPEC calculations.


3 Rhode Island’s total per pupil cost was $16,857. The U.S. total was $13,949. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data, Table 11.
struggle, as a foundation for developing a roadmap for reform. In addition to this introduction, there are six sections in this report. Section II details the structures through which Rhode Island’s K-12 system is governed. Section III offers historical analysis, showing significant changes to education systems in the United States and Rhode Island over the past half century and highlighting both successful and unsuccessful attempts at improving those systems through public policy. The next three sections of this report detail where we are today, analyzing Rhode Island teacher and student data—particularly enrollment, demographic, and student outcome data. Finally, Section VII offers comments and recommendations for consideration by policymakers and other stakeholders. This report includes several figures which present district-level demographic and student outcome data. These figures are presented in a data dashboard on RIPEC’s website that allows for user interaction and manipulation, here.

Before bringing this introduction to a close, it is worth noting that RIPEC has played a significant role in advancing education reform in Rhode Island over a period of decades. From the 1980s and into the 2010s, RIPEC published a series of reports analyzing educational outcomes, demographic trends, education expenditures, and major policy developments. In addition to its reports, RIPEC has worked in partnership with elected officials to improve education. At the request of then Governor Edward D. DiPrete, for instance, RIPEC published in 1987 the first in-depth study of education governance in nearly two decades which, along with a task force convened by DiPrete, provided the basis for several reforms which were subsequently passed into law. Similarly, in 1995, RIPEC’s director co-chaired the governor-appointed Rhode Island Goals 2000 panel, which developed a Comprehensive Education Strategy, forming the basis of a landmark 1997 education reform bill. More recently, through its research and reports, RIPEC has engaged on discrete education topics including remote schooling, charter public schools, and the state’s education funding formula.

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II. System Overview

This section provides an overview of the organizational elements of elementary and secondary education in Rhode Island, breaking down the state’s governance structures and highlighting that both state and local governments play a significant role in administering public elementary and secondary education. This section also shows that, in Rhode Island, education governance is a relatively fragmented enterprise, under which both state and local authorities are dependent on other parts of the system to carry out their responsibilities. In recognition that this governance system could be improved, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed legislation in 2022 to establish a joint study commission to “study, review, and make recommendations on how to most efficiently and effectively administer the governance” of K-16 education in the state.8

State Governance

Constitutional Authority

Local public-school governance in Rhode Island originated in the colonial era. Most colonial-era education occurred within the household, but as both Rhode Island’s population and economy expanded and diversified in the 19th century, compulsory education laws were put on the books and the state began to take a more active role in education governance. When the state adopted its constitution in 1842, sole authority over public education was conferred to state government.9 This authority was affirmed by the Rhode Island Supreme Court in the landmark 1995 Pawtucket v. Sundlun ruling, in which the Court found that the Rhode Island Constitution gives the Rhode Island General Assembly “unreviewable discretion” over public education.10 Consequently, at both the local and state levels, all authority over K-12 education in Rhode Island is ultimately derived from the General Assembly.

The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education and Department of Education

The General Assembly currently delegates the authority to coordinate education statewide to a 17-member Board of Education (BOE).11 Members of the BOE are appointed to three-year terms by the governor, subject to the advice and consent of the Senate, and are responsible for “the coordination of education from pre-K through higher education” and for setting “goals and policies for the effective coordination of these public education systems.”12 Eight members of the BOE are designated to serve on

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9 RIPEC, “Rhode Island’s Funding Formula After Ten Years: Education Finance in the Ocean State,” April 2022. The Constitution provides that it is “the duty of the general assembly to promote public schools . . . and to adopt all means which it may deem necessary and proper to secure to the people the advantages and opportunities of education.” Constitution of the State of Rhode Island, Article XII, Section 1.
11 The BOE was established by the General Assembly in 2014, replacing the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Governors for Higher Education. RIDE, Board of Education Overview.
the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education and eight members serve on the Council on Post-Secondary Education, with the BOE chair serving as a member of both councils.\textsuperscript{13}

The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education (hereinafter the “Council”) is charged with approving a master plan and implementing the broad goals and objectives for elementary and secondary education established by the BOE, and establishing a “systematic program of information gathering, processing, and analysis addressed to every aspect of elementary and secondary education.” The Council also is authorized to adopt “standards and require enforcement and to exercise general supervision over all elementary and secondary public and nonpublic education in the state.”\textsuperscript{14} However, despite this statement of broad general powers, the General Assembly has made clear that the Council’s powers in fact are limited: the Council “shall not engage in the operation or administration of any subordinate committee, local school district, school, or school program . . . except as specifically authorized by an act of the general assembly.”\textsuperscript{15}

The Council’s powers and authority are exercised by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), led by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, who is appointed by, and serves at the pleasure of, the Council.\textsuperscript{16} The Commissioner and RIDE are charged with supervising several specific functions, including recommending student instructional standards, recommending standards and qualifications for teacher certification, distributing state school funds, and overseeing local compliance with all laws relating to education.\textsuperscript{17}

Local Governance

School Committees

In contrast to the limited powers of the Council and RIDE, the Rhode Island General Assembly has vested “the entire care, control, and management” of traditional public schools to local school committees, which are publicly elected in every municipality except Providence, which has a mayor-appointed school committee, and Central Falls, which is governed by a Council-appointed seven-member board of trustees.\textsuperscript{18} School committees are charged with both policy and management functions, including the adoption of a school budget, the enactment of personnel policies, and the employment of a superintendent.\textsuperscript{19} While developing and adopting budgets is a key responsibility of school committees,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Additionally, the chair of the Governor’s Workforce Board, or designee, the chair of the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation, or designee, and the chair of the University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees, or designee, serve as non-voting, ex-officio members of the BOE. R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-97-1.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-60-4.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15} R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-60-4(a)(3).}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-60-6.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 16-2-5, 16-2-9, 16-2-34. At the request of the City of Central Falls, the state assumed an administrative takeover of the school district in July 1991 and has since paid for nearly all the district’s expenditures, minus the federal share. City of Central Falls, Audited Financial Statements & Supplementary Information for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2018. In November 2022, Providence voters will decide the fate of a proposal to establish a hybrid school board, in which five members would be appointed by the mayor and five members would be publicly elected. Amy Russo, “Providence council overrides mayor’s veto of hybrid school board, sending issue to voters,” The Providence Journal, August 10, 2022.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-2-9.}
they do not have inherent power to raise revenues through taxation or borrowing, responsibilities that lie with city or town councils.\textsuperscript{20}

**Local Education Agencies (LEAs)**

A local education agency (LEA) is a public authority that holds administrative control over one or multiple public schools. Rhode Island LEAs include traditional school districts, regional school districts, state-run schools, charter schools, and one district collaborative school. Traditional school districts comprise about half of the LEAs in the state and educate over nine in ten public school students, while the remaining Rhode Island public school students attend either charter public schools, state schools, or the district collaborative school, all of which have separate governance structures; the BOE has authority over state schools while charters are run by their governing boards.\textsuperscript{21}

**Superintendents and Principals**

A superintendent serves as “the chief administrative agent of the school committee” under state law, while principals are “the educational administrators and managers of their schools.”\textsuperscript{22} The duties of the superintendent include implementing school committee policies, preparing a budget, appointing a principal to each public school, and appointing school personnel under the recommendation of the principal.\textsuperscript{23} In addition to providing recommendations in the hiring of school personnel, the general powers and duties of principals include recommending personnel termination and preparing a school budget.\textsuperscript{24}

**School Improvement Teams**

Rhode Island law requires all school committees to establish school improvement teams for each school in a district. Members of the school improvement team may be elected by the school or appointed by school leadership but must be composed of the school’s principal and “an appropriately balanced number of teachers, education support employees, students, parents, and other business and community citizens.”\textsuperscript{25} School improvement teams are charged with assisting in identifying students’ educational needs, reviewing the school budget, and formulating a school improvement plan.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} The three types of charter public schools—district, independent, and mayoral—all have distinct governance structures, but all are required to establish a charter and governing board. R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 16-77.2-2, 16-77.3-2; 16-77.4-2. There are 66 public LEAs in Rhode Island, consisting of 32 municipal school districts, four regional school districts, four state-operated schools, one regional collaborative school, and 23 charters. RIDE, Rhode Island Public Schools: School Districts; RIDE, RI State Report Card, 2020-2021.
\textsuperscript{22} R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 16-2-11(a), 16-2-11.1(a).
\textsuperscript{23} R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-2-11(a).
\textsuperscript{24} R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-2-11.1(a).
\textsuperscript{26} Whether a school improvement team is granted “additional authority in the area of education policy” is subject to the school committee. R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-53-1-3.
This section provides a history of federal education reform efforts since the 1960s, with a particular focus on 21st century reforms, and additionally details major developments in education reform in Rhode Island from the 1980s to present. Linking the two interconnected histories, this section details the increased influence over time of the federal government in promoting state-level accountability standards across the country, including in Rhode Island.

This section also discusses both the ways in which these efforts have been successful in the Ocean State, and instances where reform efforts have proven unsuccessful. The history of education reform in Rhode Island highlights that, in some respects, the state has come a long way—including through the formation of a system for collecting and making public essential data, the enactment of a state education funding formula, and the establishment of academic standards. Yet, this section also highlights that, too often, the state’s education reform initiatives have been too fleeting to substantially improve the system, with large investment of time and resources poured into programs or initiatives (of varying effectiveness) for which there has been insufficient support or inconsistent funding. Finally, this section highlights that, in the last several years, there has been little political will to enact substantial reform, with the COVID-19 pandemic seemingly causing a standstill in any attempts to enact systemwide education reform.

Federal Education Reform

From the colonial era onward, elementary and secondary education has primarily been considered a matter of local concern, and under the U.S. Constitution, the federal government has no direct authority over the education policies of the states except for where it may infringe on individual, constitutional rights. However, a combination of national equity movements, a transitioning economy, and increased global competition kickstarted a movement to improve elementary and secondary education outcomes across the country in the mid-twentieth century. As part of that movement, and through financial incentives, the federal government began to take a more active role in influencing education policy and practice in the states.27

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

ESEA has served as the basis for federal involvement in state-level elementary and secondary education systems since it was signed into law in 1965. A component of his wider War on Poverty campaign, President Lyndon B. Johnson said the bill—which granted education funds to local LEAs—signified a “new commitment to quality and equality in the education of young people.”28 The largest financial portion of ESEA, Title I, grants funds to LEAs based on their number of economically disadvantaged students and was initially conceived as a device to lift children out of poverty. ESEA has not eliminated child poverty, but rather has been transformed by policymakers into the primary vehicle through which federal education

policy is asserted upon the states. Requiring reauthorization every five years, ESEA has provided federal policymakers with numerous opportunities to implement reform.

A Nation at Risk

In 1981, Education Secretary T. H. Bell responded to national anxieties around a changing economy by convening the National Commission on Excellence in Education and tasking the group with addressing the “widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in [the U.S.] educational system.” Two years later, in 1983, the group published A Nation at Risk, a seminal report that argued that the “educational foundations” of American society were “being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity.”

Among the report’s findings were that U.S. students spent less time learning than most of their peers in the industrialized world and that high school diploma requirements were underwhelming, with 35 states requiring only one year of math. A Nation at Risk took issue with teacher preparation programs, arguing that they were weighted toward educational methods rather than subject matter, and noted teaching shortages in key fields, such as math and science. Among the report’s recommendations were that graduation requirements be strengthened, schools adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, the school year be lengthened, teacher preparation programs made more rigorous, and teacher contracts be extended to 11 months to increase time for professional development.

A Nation at Risk has received a fair share of criticism in the decades since its publication, with scholars pointing out that some of the report’s major tenets, such as the decline in educational quality, were inaccurate. Yet, the report had lasting influence. While a ten-year retrospective survey on the report found that schools had only been “somewhat successful” in implementing the report’s recommendations, some local reform initiatives moved forward, with states updating graduation requirements, implementing evaluation and testing systems, and broadening teacher certification and professional development requirements.

A Nation at Risk moreover marked the beginning of a student-outcome and standards-based reform model that became central to federal reform efforts thereafter.

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29 Ibid.
30 The Hawkins-Stafford Amendment in 1988 helped shift the original intent of ESEA by enabling districts to use Title I funds schoolwide and thereby better enabling federal policymakers to use those funds as leverage for improving local systems of education. Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 As James W. Guthrie and Matthew G. Springer write, “it may have been more accurate to NAR to assert that achievement by American students has historically matched or exceeded that of previous generations, whereas social expectations have risen at a disproportionately faster rate.” James W. Guthrie and Matthew G. Springer, “A Nation at Risk Revisited: Did ‘Wrong’ Reasoning Result in ‘Right’ Results? At What Cost?,” Peabody Journal of Education vol, 79, no. 1 (2004): 7-35.
Goals 2000 and the Improving America’s Schools Act

Enacted by Congress in 1994, Goals 2000 provided incentives for states to develop education standards and assessments. That same year, the latest renewal of ESEA was passed as the Improving America’s Schools Act, marking the first time that the federal government used Title I funds to incentivize standards-based reforms. To receive Title I funds, states were required under the Act to set standards in math and English and require all students to take tests that demonstrated the achievement of those standards at least once in elementary, middle, and high school.36 Ultimately, however, the impact of this legislation was limited. First, states had begun enacting their own standards in the lead up to and aftermath of A Nation at Risk’s publication, so that by 1994, all but eight states already had state-level standards for math and English. Moreover, enforcement of the Improving America’s Schools Act was lax, and compliance was weak; two years after the target date for full compliance, 2002, only 16 states had fully complied.37

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

The standards- and accountability-based reform requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) echoed those of the Improving America’s School Act but were much more prescriptive.38 Passed by Congress with bipartisan support, NCLB was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001 and marked both the reauthorization of ESEA and a significant increase in the presence of the federal government in the sphere of education reform.39 NCLB tied Title I funding for disadvantaged students to the establishment of academic standards in math and English and an annual, state-chosen assessment of proficiency for all students in grades three to eight, and in one year of high school.40 NCLB additionally required states to conduct one year of testing in science and set targets for 100 percent of children to demonstrate proficiency in reading and math by 2014.41

In addition to increasing the amount of mandated testing in math and English and adding required testing in science, NCLB differed from the Improving America’s Schools Act in two significant ways. First, NCLB required states to disaggregate student assessment data by race and ethnicity, as well as by economic disadvantage, English proficiency, and special education status. In doing so, NCLB required states to take special consideration of reducing achievement gaps affecting these subgroups.42 A second, and far more controversial, difference is that NCLB required schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) by

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40 NCLB enabled states to determine at which year of high school they would administer testing. Ibid.
41 Ibid.
way of improved test scores. Schools that failed to demonstrate AYP were subject to corrective actions, the most serious of which was the closure and restructuring of a school.43

NCLB was met with criticism on several fronts, with the most persistent disapproval directed at the AYP requirement. By 2011, nearly half of schools nationwide faced NCLB-related penalties for failing to meet AYP; in response, President Barack Obama’s administration began allowing states to apply for a waiver from NCLB’s accountability provision.44 Ultimately, 43 states received such waivers.45 As education and public policy scholar Kathryn A. McDermott argues, a major issue with the AYP accountability provision is that it offered little in the way of support; “instead of providing extensive systems of instructional guidance and professional development,” she writes, “states generally could only pressure schools and districts to improve by threatening sanctions.”46

Race to the Top (RTTT) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

A response to the Great Recession, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act enacted under the Obama administration set aside approximately $100 billion for education, of which $4.35 billion was earmarked for Race to the Top (RTTT), a competitive grant program designed to encourage reforms to improve student outcomes and close achievement gaps.47 Eligibility for RTTT grants was based on a point system, with points awarded to states that met a series of criteria, including the use of academic standards that were developed by a consortium of states, the implementation of a statewide longitudinal data system, and the creation of high-quality career pathways for teachers.48

RTTT was successful in encouraging states to enact reforms, and the academic standards portion of the grant application process provided strong incentive for states to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a common set of standards adopted by many states and the only standards that met the grant requirements.49 The U.S. Department of Education additionally set aside $350 million of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to provide grants for interstate consortiums to develop assessments to measure CCSS attainment. Two assessments were developed with these grants: the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium, which had 20 member states and Washington D.C. at its peak, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which had 17

43 RIPEC, Results: Education in Rhode Island, 2011, December 2011.
48 William G. Howell, Results of President Obama’s Race to the Top, Education Next, July 14, 2015.
member states at its peak.\textsuperscript{50} Both assessments were first administered in the 2014-2015 school year but, by that time, some states had already dropped out of their respective consortium, a trend that continued over the next several years.\textsuperscript{51}

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

Another reauthorization of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law under the Obama administration in 2015. The bill sustained several key NCLB components, including standards and testing requirements, and the requirement to disaggregate testing data by subgroup. At the same time, ESSA sought to be less prescriptive than NCLB, both by broadening the definition of student achievement to include non-assessment factors such as student absenteeism and by giving states greater discretion in defining low-performing schools. Additionally, rather than setting a target for 100 percent proficiency, ESSA required states to set long-term and interim goals for increasing student proficiency and decreasing achievement gaps.\textsuperscript{52} Under ESSA, states were required to submit a consolidated state plan to the U.S. Department of Education that detailed long-term and interim goals, means of determining student achievement, and means of identifying low-performing schools.\textsuperscript{53}

**Education Reform in Rhode Island**

Reflecting national trends and federal requirements, much of the education reform efforts in Rhode Island over the last several decades have centered around clarifying and elevating academic standards, aligning those standards to components of the system—including teacher certification and training—and measuring student outcomes. In further similarity to federal reforms, education reform in Rhode Island has not been linear; while some reforms have had longevity, others were terminated or significantly altered along the way.

**1980s-Era Reforms**

**Basic Education Program (BEP)**

Seeking to enhance educational standards and make them more uniform, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed legislation in 1983 requiring the development of a Basic Education Program (BEP) and a method of determining the local financial contribution to be required in support of that BEP.\textsuperscript{54} Beyond its financial provisions, the BEP functionally serves as a state code for education, establishing a set of

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} This backlash was due to criticism of standardized assessments as well as the introduction of teacher evaluation systems that made use of student-achievement data. Ashley Jochim and Patrick McGuinn, “The Politics of the Common Core Assessments,” *Education Next*, 2016.


statewide educational standards, as well as regulations regarding curriculum, student support systems, and administration and management systems. The BEP was last revised in 2009.

Teacher Preparation Program Requirements

Addressing a criticism levied at U.S. education systems generally in A Nation at Risk that teacher preparation programs placed too little emphasis on subject matter expertise, in 1984 Rhode Island’s teacher certification provisions were revised to specify which courses prospective teachers must complete to be certified to teach an academic subject.

The Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT)

In the 1987-1988 school year, Rhode Island began administering a statewide standardized assessment. Administered to students in grades three, six, and eight, the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) was a nationally normed, multiple choice standardized assessment in math and reading. Students in grades three and six also completed a writing portion of the MAT. Prior to the MAT’s implementation, there was no consistent means of gathering district- or school-level student outcome data in Rhode Island.

1988 Reforms

In 1988, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed into law a series of reform bills, enacting several recommendations made the previous year by a task force convened by Governor DiPrete. These included an increase in the state’s share of education funding and the initiation of a uniform school budgeting process. The 1988 reforms additionally required that children entering first grade have attended kindergarten, though it was not until 2016-2017 that public school districts in the state were required to offer full-day kindergarten.

Providence Blueprint for Education (PROBE) Commission

Seeking to address poor student outcomes in Providence, the Public Education Fund, a Rhode Island Foundation initiative, launched a study of the city’s school system in 1993. Led by former University of Rhode Island President Edward D. Eddy, a task force investigated the system over the course of 18 months before publishing the Providence Blueprint for Education (PROBE) report in 1994. Based on findings that

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55 Standards for vocation and technical education programs are also in the BEP. RIDE, Basic Education Program for Rhode Island Public Schools, Revised March 1989. As part of the BEP’s adoption, RIDE began to conduct on-site reviews of each district on a five-year cyclical basis. The General Assembly set aside $2.0 million per annum to facilitate this work. RIPEC, “Results: Education in Rhode Island,” 1997.
56 RIDE, Basic Education Program.
58 In the early 1990s, the state began administering the math and ELA MAT to grades four, eight, and ten, with the writing portion of the MAT administered to students in grades four and eight. “Results: The 1990 Taxpayers’ Guide to Rhode Island Public Schools,” 1990.
59 Children who are of kindergarten age (five) are not covered under compulsory attendance law, and so this requirement is not always met in practice. RIPEC, “1988 Taxpayers’ Guide to Public School Finance: Investing in the Future,” June 1988; 2022 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook.
60 The task force was comprised of 33 community leaders and parents. It conducted structured observation of schools and studied available data. Edward D. Eddy, et. al., Providence Blueprint for Education Report, May 1993.
included a lack of basic data collection and inadequate professional development for educators, the report made 39 recommendations. Among the PROBE recommendations were that Providence develop a data collection system, lengthen the teacher working year to allow for professional development and goal setting, and allow principals to choose their staff. To address inadequate learning levels among students, the report also recommended lengthening the student day.\textsuperscript{61} Some of the PROBE report’s recommendations have since been enacted, but most have not, and little change was made in the direct aftermath of its publication.\textsuperscript{62}

**Charter Public School Act**

In 1995, Rhode Island enacted charter school enabling legislation, joining 16 other states at the time.\textsuperscript{63} The Charter Public School Act initially only allowed for district-controlled charter schools, but in 1998 it was expanded to enable independent charter schools, which are organized by a higher education institution or other nonprofit. In 2008, mayoral academies, which are founded by a mayor or elected town administrator acting through a nonprofit, also were authorized under the Act. There are currently 25 charters in Rhode Island, and student enrollment in charter schools has grown from 329 students in 2001 to 10,537 students (7.6 percent of all public school students) in 2022.\textsuperscript{64} This number is expected to expand in future years; the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education has approved 5,781 new charter school seats to be added between 2022 and 2032.\textsuperscript{65} As detailed in a 2021 RIPEC report, this expansion is in part a product of demand—the number of students applying for charter school seats has far outpaced the number of seats available in recent years, with between 4.4 and 5.7 unique applicants per available charter school seat during the period between 2014-2015 and 2021-2022. Student outcomes vary greatly across charter public schools, but RIPEC’s analysis showed that charter schools overall outperformed the traditional districts where their students resided in both standardized assessments and other outcome criteria reviewed by RIDE.\textsuperscript{66}

**1997 Reforms**

In 1995, Governor Lincoln Almond and Commissioner McWalters convened the 60-member Rhode Island Goals 2000 panel, which produced a report on the state’s Comprehensive Education Strategy (CES) the

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\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} For instance, Providence has since started collecting and disseminating data which the PROBE commission found unavailable. The report also recommended that the district required teachers to meet with parents, something that was achieved in the most recent negotiation of teacher’s contracts. Jeremy Bernfeld, “Providence teachers approve new contract,” The Public’s Radio, August 2, 2021; Steven Eisenstadt, “Voices in the halls: a probing examination of Providence schools slow to change,” The Providence Journal, March 15, 1993.
\textsuperscript{63} Minnesota became the first state to pass charter enabling legislation in 1991. As of the 2018-2019 school year, all but five states had charter enabling legislation and 3.3 million U.S. public school students, representing 6.5 percent of the nation’s public school students, attended a charter public school. RIPEC, “An Analysis of Charter Public Schools in Rhode Island,” June 2021.
\textsuperscript{64} The Charter Public School Act provides for a maximum of 35 charters in the state and places no limits on the number of students who may be educated under each charter. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. If total public school enrollment remains flat over this period, over 11 percent of Rhode Island public school students will attend charter schools in 2032. RIDE, October Enrollment data; RIPEC calculations.
\textsuperscript{66} RIPEC, “An Analysis of Charter Public Schools in Rhode Island,” June 2021.
following year.\textsuperscript{67} The CES included strategies to enhance accountability metrics, improve schools, eliminate student outcome gaps, and enhance community and family involvement.\textsuperscript{68} The CES culminated with the proposal and passage of the 1997 Reform Act, which included many, but not all elements of the CES.

The Reform Act established new requirements for state and local governance structures that collectively sought to establish high standards, align education plans to those standards, and promote greater accountability. First, it required the development and publication of statewide standards and performance benchmarks in core subject areas for grades four, eight, and ten.\textsuperscript{69} LEAs were then required to develop a strategic plan consistent with these state standards and benchmarks. District strategic plans also were required to demonstrate both improved student performance overall and the closing of performance gaps. As with NCLB, the 1997 reform bill required strategic plans to be based on AYP.\textsuperscript{70} To measure AYP, the law required the continuation and expansion of a statewide assessment program in math, reading, and writing. Rhode Island had required the administration of the MAT since the 1980s, but in the 1996-1997 school year, the state began administering the New Standards Reference Exam (NSRE) instead.\textsuperscript{71} The 1997 bill moreover required RIDE to release an annual report that disaggregated assessment data by key demographic features.\textsuperscript{72}

The 1997 Reform Act also included important financial elements. It required districts to use a uniform program to track expenditures and established new investments in the form of several state categorical funds available to districts. Together, these funds amounted to a $25.0 million investment in FY 1998, 6.0 percent of state education expenditures that year.\textsuperscript{73} Most of these funds have been eliminated, including, notably, the Professional Development Investment Fund, which was distributed to LEAs for the continued development of teachers and staff, and which was last funded in an amount of $5.8 million in FY 2009.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{67} The panel was comprised of elected and appointed government officials, administrators, teachers, parents, labor leaders, school committee members, and representatives from community organizations and businesses. Rhode Island Goals 2000 Comprehensive Education Strategy, \textit{“All Kids, All Schools: Preparing all Rhode Island Children to be lifelong learners, productive workers and responsible citizens,”} June 1996.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69} RIPEC, \textit{“Results: Education in Rhode Island,”} 1992; R.I. Pub. Laws \textit{Chapter 030, 1997 - H 6496 Substitute A as Amended.}

\textsuperscript{70} The Commissioner was required by the bill to produce an annual report that set performance benchmarks and detailed district and school performance. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{71} Vermont also used the NSRE in this period. Rhode Island administered the NSRE to eighth and tenth graders in 1996-1997, while still administering the MAT to fourth graders. The following year, the NSRE was first administered to fourth graders. Unlike the multiple-choice MAT, the NSRE attempted to measure both basic and advanced skills. RIPEC, \textit{“Results: Education in Rhode Island,”} 1999; Kathryn A. McDermott, \textit{“Interstate Governance Standards and Testing,”} in \textit{Education Governance for the Twenty-First Century: Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform}, Paul Mann and Patrick McGuinn, eds., (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2013): 130 – 155.

\textsuperscript{72} R.I. Pub. Laws \textit{Chapter 030, 1997 - H 6496 Substitute A as Amended}. Three years later, NCLB would require all states to disaggregate assessment data.

\textsuperscript{73} These funds included: a student language assistance investment fund, a professional development investment fund, an early childhood investment fund, a student technology investment fund, a student equity investment fund, distributed based on the proportion of FRPL eligible students, and a core instruction equity fund, that provided additional funds to districts with low property tax capacity. R.I. Pub. Laws, \textit{1997, ch. 30,} art. 31, § 1.

\textsuperscript{74} Distribution of funds was based on a district’s pupil-teacher ratio, with about 15 percent retained by RIDE to support professional development across districts. R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, \textit{Rhode Island Education Aid}, September 2021. In FY 2022, categorical aid comprised just 2.9 percent of overall state education expenditures. RIPEC, \textit{“Rhode Island’s Funding Formula After Ten Years: Education Finance in the Ocean State,”} April 2022.
Today, the most well-known portion of the 1997 reform bill is the Crowley Act, named for State Representative and Board of Regents member, Paul W. Crowley. The Crowley Act’s first iteration required that LEAs adopt “a series of progressive support and intervention strategies” for schools that did not meet the AYP as outlined in their strategic plans.\(^75\) The following year, the Crowley Act was expanded to outline specific progressive support and intervention strategies for struggling schools and districts, including curriculum alignment and resource oversight. Perhaps more importantly, RIDE was authorized to assume progressive levels of control over a failing school, culminating in the reconstitution and restructuring of a school.\(^76\)

The 1997 reforms were significant and influenced the direction of statewide education reform policy for the next decade. However, looking back on that period last year, Peter McWalters (Rhode Island Education Commissioner from 1992–2009) stated that Rhode Island experienced “only . . . incremental changes” because of these reforms, and that the project was “not transformative . . . particularly for underserved populations of color, those with socio-economic disadvantage, and those experiencing concentrated segregation.” “Inertia of the system” was the main roadblock to transformational reform, he wrote.\(^77\)

**School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) Initiatives**

The School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) visiting program (1997–2004) tasked teams of SALT Regent Fellows—comprised of teachers, administrators, parents, school committee members, and RIDE staff—with conducting structured, week-long observations of schools around the state and producing public reports on their findings.\(^78\) The purpose of SALT visits was to improve student learning, enhance the quality of available information, and promote school accountability. The ultimate effect of the program is debatable, but a 2005 RIDE-commissioned survey found that 80.9 percent of the teachers who served as Fellows agreed that the experience was “the most powerful professional development experience” of their career.\(^79\)

Another SALT initiative, the SALT Survey of Learning Environment, was first administered in 1998. The SALT survey was administered annually to students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and gauged school culture and climate. Today, RIDE utilizes SurveyWorks for the same function.\(^80\)

\(^75\) R.I. Pub. Laws *Chapter 030, 1997 - H 6496 Substitute A as Amended*.
\(^76\) The law specified that, for RIDE to intervene, a school must have fallen short of performance goals for three years despite the implementation of progressive support and intervention strategies. R.I. Pub. Laws, 1998, ch. 31, art. 31 § 1; R.I. Gen. Laws, § 16-7.1-5.
\(^77\) Peter McWalters, “50 Years Leading Systemic Change: A Conversation with Peter McWalters,” Education Reimagined.
\(^78\) It was a requirement that active classroom teachers comprise at least half of any single visiting team and that each team have at least one local school administrator. 235 Rhode Island schools were observed in the program’s seven-year run. Each report contained an assessment of 1) how well students were learning, 2) how well teachers were teaching, and 3) how well the school was supporting learning and teaching. Thomas A. Wilson and Mark W. Andrews, “The Value of Rhode Island’s SALT School Visit: A Survey Study of the Perceptions of SALT Visit Team Members,” A Catalpa Ltd. Research Report, June 2005.
\(^79\) Ibid.
NCLB-Related Reforms

In the 2004-2005 school year, both the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) and Infoworks were launched in Rhode Island as a response to NCLB requirements. While Rhode Island had been administering standardized assessments to students across the state for well over a decade at the time of NCLB’s passage, the new law now required the state to expand the program to cover all students from grades three to eight. In response, Rhode Island partnered with Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire to develop the NECAP.\(^{81}\) In addition to capitalizing on economies of scale, Commissioner McWalters, who anticipated that Rhode Island would underperform the other states, intended to use a common test as a means of pressing for future reforms.\(^{82}\)

In response to an NCLB requirement that states establish a public accountability system, RIDE launched Infoworks in 2004. Infoworks provided state and local data—including demographic information, student outcome data, and SALT survey responses—and operated until RIDE began showing student demographic and other data on its website in the form of school, LEA, and state report cards.\(^{83}\)

Reforms from the Early 2010s

Just as the significant era for education reform in the late 1990s was in part the combined product of an ambitious commissioner and a nationwide movement for reform, the 2009 appointment of Deborah Gist as Rhode Island’s Education Commissioner combined with the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant process created a new wave of statewide reform efforts. RTTT helped usher in reform in two ways, first by incentivizing the enactment of the reforms necessary to secure the grant, and then by providing a $75 million grant to implement reforms. While unrelated to RTTT, a push to adjust high school graduation requirements coincided chronologically with this concentrated reform effort.

Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA)

The development of the Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA), a system designed to standardize reporting of education revenues and expenditures across schools and districts, began in 2005, but RTTT provided financial incentive to get the system up and running. UCOA was intended to enable school and district leaders to efficiently and effectively allocate resources by relying on direct comparisons between school and LEA spending. However, testimony from RIDE before the Rhode Island Senate in 2019 revealed that the system was primarily being used for federal reporting.\(^{84}\) In response, the General Assembly allocated

\(^{81}\) Connecticut and Massachusetts chose not to participate in the NECAP both because they had fewer concerns about fiscal constraints, and because the exams they were already administering were relatively established and highly regarded. Kathryn A. McDermott, “Interstate Governance Standards and Testing,” in Education Governance for the Twenty-First Century: Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform, Paul Manna and Patrick McGuinn, eds., (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2013): 130 – 155.

\(^{82}\) Ibid.


\(^{84}\) RIDE, Uniform Chart of Accounts Executive Summary, March 25, 2011; R.I. Senate, “Special Legislative Task Force to Study Rhode Island’s Education Funding Formula,” January 28, 2020.
funds to create two full-time equivalent positions within RIDE to produce regular analyses of school and district spending using UCOA data.85

*Education Funding Formula*

Efforts to establish a predictable formula for funding education at the state level were similarly underway before RTTT, but the grant process incentivized the enactment of a formula in 2010. The formula was designed not only to make funding more predictable, but to increase the state’s share of education funding overall and direct greater state resources to districts with lower property wealth and greater levels of student poverty. While accomplishing each of these goals to some extent, a RIPEC report from 2021 established both that Rhode Island continues to rely more heavily on local funding for education than the nation overall and that some of the state’s poorest districts continue to be underfunded on a per pupil basis relative to the state total.86

*Educator Evaluation*

RTTT also helped incentivize and enable the implementation of a new educator evaluation system, which standardized the length of time between evaluations and made professional development a requirement of recertification.87 Despite these changes, Rhode Island’s educator evaluation system appears to be neither particularly rigorous, nor particularly well regarded by teachers. A 2016 RIDE report found that the vast majority (94.0 percent) of educators received the rank of “effective” or “highly effective” the previous school year.88 At the same time, a nationwide survey in 2017-2018 found that 52.0 percent of Rhode Island teachers said that their state’s teacher evaluation process led to improved student learning, compared to 69.2 percent of teachers nationwide.89

*Teacher Preparation Program Standards*

In 2013, the state adopted higher standards for teacher preparation programs. The minimum GPA for admission into a teacher preparation program was raised, and the new standards additionally required that a program’s standardized admissions assessment average be set in the top 50 percent of the national distribution.90 Allowing for some flexibility, the new standards enabled programs to offer conditional acceptance to substandard candidates. The language of the new standards further called on programs to “recruit, admit, and support high-quality candidates who reflect the diversity of Rhode Island’s PK-12

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85 R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, Budget as Enacted: Fiscal Year 2022, Section I: Budget at a Glance.
86 RIPEC, “Rhode Island’s Funding Formula After Ten Years: Education Finance in the Ocean State,” April 2022.
87 These revisions impacted support professionals and principals as well as teachers. With some exceptions, teachers who are deemed “highly effective” at their evaluation are to be reevaluated in no more than three years, teachers who are “effective” are required to be reevaluated in no more than two years, and all other teachers must be evaluated annually. RIPEC, Results: Education in Rhode Island, 2011, December 2011; RIDE, Transforming Education in Rhode Island: The Race to the Top Opportunity, May 2011; RIDE, Educator Evaluation: Frequently Asked Questions. When the rules around educator evaluation were first promulgated, effectiveness ratings were linked to certification renewal, but in 2018 the Council disassociated educator evaluation from recertification. RIDE, Certificate Regulations, Promulgated December 2018.
90 The GPA requirement for individuals was raised from 2.5 to 2.75, while the average GPA of all candidates in a program was set at 3.0. RIDE, Rhode Island Standards for Educator Preparation, 2013.
students.” While the standards do not provide a framework for enhancing the diversity of teacher preparation programs, there was an increase in the proportion of students of color among education majors after the standards were adopted—a notable trend demonstrated in other states that elevated their teacher preparation program standards during the same period.91

**Beginning Teacher Induction Program**

Rhode Island’s beginning teacher induction program was supported with RTTT funds and sought to improve teacher effectiveness by providing one-on-one coaching to new teachers. The program matched each new teacher in the state with an induction coach, who supported the new teacher for an average of 90 minutes per week. All districts were offered support for first year teachers, while a second year of support was provided only in urban core districts.92 The coaches were veteran teachers who received training and conducted their mentorship while on leave from teaching duties. The program ran for three school years (2011-2014) and ceased operation when grant funds from RTTT were fully expended.93 While the success of teacher induction programs depends on the quality and length of the programs, a meta-analysis from 2011 found that induction programs typically have a positive effect on teacher retention and student outcomes.94

**The Academy for Transformative Leadership**

In 2013, Rhode Island invested $5.7 million of RTTT funds to launch the Academy for Transformative Leadership, designed for the development of school leadership teams—comprised of teachers and building administrators—in schools that had been identified for improvement under NCLB. The Academy’s primary program was a year-long residency, but it also offered a summer institute, professional development modules, and technical assistance. A relatively small number of principals and teachers participated in the residency (six), summer institute (19), and professional development modules (28) between 2013 and 2015, and programming was essentially discontinued in 2016 when grant funds from RTTT were fully expended.95

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92 Available sources from RIDE do not define urban core. RIDE, RI Beginning Teacher Induction Program. However, the most common definition used in Rhode Island cites the urban core as containing the cities of Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket. For instance, see: R.I. Division of Municipal Finance, All Phases Comparison: The Municipal Transparency Portal program.


94 Richard M. Ingersoll and Michael Strong, “The Impact of Induction and Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers: A Critical Review of the Research,” Review of Education Research vol. 81, no. 2 (June 2011): 201-233. In the largest of these studies—a U.S. Department of Education-funded study that looked at over 1,000 teachers in 418 schools and across 17 large and low-income public school districts—researchers found that, after three years, the average student of a teacher who had gone through a beginning teacher induction program saw a four percentage point gain in reading and an eight percentage point gain in math.

The CCSS and the PARCC

At least in part to secure RTTT funding, in 2010 Rhode Island adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).\textsuperscript{96} To test achievement of these standards and benchmark against other states, in the 2014-2015 school year Rhode Island began using the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), rather than the NECAP, to meet federal testing requirements.\textsuperscript{97}

Graduation Requirements – Testing

As of the 2018-2019 school year, 13 states had in place graduation requirements linked to demonstrated proficiency on a standardized assessment, including neighboring Massachusetts, which has had such a requirement since 2003.\textsuperscript{98} Rhode Island was one of several states to push for the addition of testing to existing graduation requirements in the 2000s.\textsuperscript{99} The movement to establish testing as a graduation requirement in Rhode Island began in 2008, when the Board of Regents proposed making a student’s performance on the state’s standardized high school exam count for one-third of their graduation requirement in both math and language arts, with the remaining two-thirds based on coursework, projects, and portfolios. The General Assembly rejected the proposal, but there was another push for a testing requirement in 2013.\textsuperscript{100} A number of groups campaigned vociferously in opposition, arguing that this policy would disproportionately and negatively impact students from historically disadvantaged subgroups, and convincing the Assembly to pass a bill placing a three-year moratorium on a testing requirement in 2014.\textsuperscript{101} Effectively, the moratorium stamped out efforts to implement a testing requirement for graduation in Rhode Island.

Developments from the Late 2010s and Early 2020s

There have been a handful of significant education reform developments in the last eight years, including the adoption of a new standardized assessment, a revision of the state’s accountability infrastructure, a movement towards standardized high-quality curriculum, and the state takeover of the Providence Public School District (PPSD). However, this most recent period has not reflected the same urgency for broader reform seen in the late 1990s and early 2010s, and instead has been characterized by reforms that generally have been piecemeal in nature and limited in scope.

\textsuperscript{96} RIPEC, Results: Education in Rhode Island, 2011, December 2011.


\textsuperscript{99} These states include Arkansas, Arizona, California, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, and Oklahoma. Ibid.


ESSA Plan and Rhode Island’s Accountability System

Under ESSA, every state was required to submit a plan for approval by the U.S. Department of Education that detailed their accountability system, among other requirements.102 Rhode Island’s ESSA plan was submitted in September 2017 and included a modification of its accountability systems. The state introduced a five-star classification system, or report card, to measure school and district success and identify low-achieving schools and districts.103 Under the report card system, which was first used in the 2017-2018 school year, schools are measured by ELA and math achievement and growth, English language proficiency, student absenteeism and suspension, graduation rate (if applicable), and the number of low-performing student subgroups. Additionally, in 2019. Rhode Island added to its classification system the Diploma Plus category, which measures postsecondary success.104 To be categorized as high-achieving, schools are required to obtain a sufficient score on each indicator. Figure 1 shows the Rhode Island school classification chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement: ELA and Math (max. 8 points)</th>
<th>Growth: ELA and Math (max. 6 points)</th>
<th>English Language Proficiency (max. 4 points)</th>
<th>Graduation Rate (max. 5 points)</th>
<th>Diploma Plus (max. 6 points)</th>
<th>Exceeds Expectations, Absenteeism, &amp; Suspension (max. 15 points)</th>
<th># of Low-Performing Subgroups</th>
<th>Star Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6-8 points (3-4 per subject)</td>
<td>4-6 points (2-3 per subject)</td>
<td>3-4 points</td>
<td>4-5 points</td>
<td>5-6 points</td>
<td>12-15 points</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 points (2-4 per subject)</td>
<td>2 points</td>
<td>4 points (2+ per indicator)</td>
<td>10-11 points</td>
<td>1 subgroup</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 subgroup</td>
<td>★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-11 total points</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 points</td>
<td>3-4 points</td>
<td>7-9 points</td>
<td>More than 1 subgroup</td>
<td></td>
<td>★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 total points</td>
<td>1 point</td>
<td>2 points</td>
<td>2 points</td>
<td>5-6 points</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 points</td>
<td>2 points</td>
<td>1 point</td>
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<td>★</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The U.S. Department of Education waived state accountability systems due to COVID-19 for both the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, and as a result, star ratings have only been released thus far for two school years: 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. In 2018-2019, about one-third of schools in the state were rated as lower performing one- or two-star schools (12 percent one-star and 20 percent two-star), but three-quarters of schools in the state’s urban core—Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and

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102 States were also required to establish methods of identifying and improving schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement. These schools are required to design and implement a school improvement plan, and schools that do not improve within four years are required to implement a school design model. Historically, the state has found that, once identified, improving a low-performing school is challenging. In its ESSA plan, RID noted that, since the 2009-2010 school year, 22 schools had been designated as underperforming and that, by the spring of 2018, only two had improved enough to shed that designation. U.S. Dept. of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan, March 2017.

103 Prior to the five-star system, Rhode Island relied on a Comprehensive Index Score to make school accountability determinations. According to RIDE’s ESSA plan, this system was too complex to be easily understood by stakeholders and masked areas of poor performance. RIDE, Rhode Island’s Every Student Succeeds Act State Plan, Revised March 29, 2018.

104 Postsecondary success contains two metrics. The first is the number of students earning a Commissioner’s Seal, which recognizes demonstrated proficiency in math and ELA on an approved assessment at any time during high school. The second is a measure of postsecondary credentialing, including industry-recognized credentials, college credit, and Advanced Placement. RIDE, 2019 RI School Accountability Technical Report.
Woonsocket—were one- or two-star schools (36 percent one-star and 39 percent two-star). Conversely, 16 percent of Rhode Island schools received a four-star rating and seven percent received a five-star rating, but no schools in these four urban school districts received a four-star rating and only one school—Classical High School in Providence—received a five-star rating. In total, 22 schools were identified as in need of Comprehensive Support and Improvement in 2018-2019, 17 of which were in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, or Woonsocket.105

Rhode Island’s ESSA plan also detailed the use of a new assessment measure, the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) and the SAT.106 Administered to students in grades three through eight, the RICAS took the place of the PARCC, which had only been administered twice in the Ocean State before being replaced in 2017-2018.107 RIDE partnered with Massachusetts to use its testing system, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). RICAS proponents noted that the MCAS is a highly regarded assessment and that the RICAS would enable direct comparison between Rhode Island and Massachusetts, a state that is considered to have one of the country’s best public education systems.108

In December 2018, the Council made a few noteworthy revisions to its standards for educators, particularly regarding teacher licensure and professional development. Under updated regulations, the time aspiring teachers spend student teaching was increased (from 12 weeks to two semesters), and the transfer of licensure from Massachusetts and Connecticut to Rhode Island was made easier.109 The Council also altered professional development requirements by tying professional learning to licensure renewal, requiring teachers to obtain a certain number of Professional Learning Units (PLUs), and requiring LEAs to create professional learning plans in collaboration with educators.110 For new educators seeking their first certificate renewal, 30 PLUs per year are required, while veteran educators are required to obtain 20 PLUs per annum. Various professional development activities are converted into PLUs by the state, including the attainment of higher education credits and National Board certification.111

State Takeover of Providence Public School District (PPSD)

Under a newly appointed education commissioner, Angélica Infante-Green, and with support from Jorge Elorza, the city’s mayor, RIDE took control over PPSD on November 1, 2019, relying on its authority under the Crowley Act.112 The takeover came on the heels of a state-commissioned report issued by the Johns

105 2022 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook; RIDE, Report Card data.
107 Rhode Island was one of many states to move away from the PARCC, citing concerns that it was too costly, time-consuming, and difficult. Linda Borg, R.I. adopts Mass. Model for testing, The Providence Journal, April 13, 2017.
109 The Praxis Series II was used as a component of teacher licensure in 46 states as of 2018. Prospective teachers also must have 60 hours of field experience. RIDE, Office of Educator Excellence and Certification Services, Certification Regulations: Promulgated December 2018.
110 Ibid.
Hopkins Institute for Education Policy. Echoing many of the issues cited in the PROBE report, the Johns Hopkins team found that the district was “overburdened with multiple, overlapping sources of governance and bureaucracy with no clear domains of authority and very little scope for transformative change,” resulting in dysfunction, inconsistency, and the stifling of innovation. Since implementing the takeover in 2019, RIDE has appointed district administrators, renegotiated teacher contracts, introduced standardized curriculum, and launched a district newsletter, among other work. RIDE has also faced criticism and concern about inadequate accountability related to the takeover, leading to the passage of legislation in 2022 authorizing the Providence School Board to provide oversight, requiring measurable annual performance goals from RIDE, and limiting the length of the takeover.

2019 Education Reform Package

In May 2019, members of the General Assembly, including both the Senate President and Speaker of the House, held a press conference to unveil a package of seven education reform bills. Of the seven bills introduced, three were signed into law. The first and thus-far most significant of these laws required standardized and high-quality academic standards, curriculum frameworks, curriculum, and materials to set high expectations for students, create consistency across educational systems, and ensure alignment between standards, instruction, and assessments. LEAs are required to select and implement high-quality sets of curriculum and materials in math, ELA, and science and technology over a five-year implementation period. The law additionally requires LEAs to offer professional development around new curriculum.

Working with EdReports—a national nonprofit organization that reviews instruction materials—RIDE has selected a menu of five sets of math and ELA curriculum and materials from which LEAs may choose. LEAs are required to have selected a set of high-quality curriculum and materials identified by RIDE by

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113 According to researchers, the consequences of this central problem were 1) “an exceptionally low level of academic instruction,” 2) a school culture that was “broken,” with “safety . . . a daily concern for students and teachers,” 3) a sense among educators of not feeling supported and not having adequate professional development, 4) a sense among school leaders that they were not set up for success, and 5) and parents feeling “marginalized and demoralized.” Johns Hopkins School of Education Institute for Education Policy, Providence Public School District: A Review, June 2019.

114 RIDE, Presentation to the Commission of Elementary and Secondary Education on PPSD, June 1, 2022.

115 The takeover may last no more than five years, subject to renewal under additional criteria for no more than three additional years. R.I. General Assembly Press Releases, “Assembly passes bill for oversight, accountability for Providence schools takeover,” June 30, 2022.

116 Those bills that were not signed into law would have 1) added an instructional component to teacher certification testing requirements, 2) required RIDE to revise teacher evaluation systems to emphasize the alignment of instruction to academic standards, 3) established a procedure for certifying provisional educators in high-need areas, and 4) required RIDE to provide additional supports to LEAs “regarding effective ways to evaluate . . . student improvement and proficiency.” R.I. General Assembly Press Releases, “General Assembly leaders unveil package of comprehensive education reform legislation,” May 7, 2019.

117 Key subject areas were defined in the bill as mathematics, ELA, science and technology, history and social studies, world languages, and the arts. R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 089, 2019 – H 5008, Substitute B.

118 The law provides for means through which LEAs may acquire a waiver or extension. Ibid.

June 30, 2023, and the majority of LEAs had done so by the 2021-2022 school year. The selection of science and technology materials is not required until 2025.

A second law passed as part of the 2019 education reform package sought to reshape education governance at the local level by providing for a greater degree of what has been called site- or school-based management and altering the existing accountability infrastructure. This legislation shifted some responsibilities away from school committees—namely, giving advice and consent on the hiring of all personnel—to the superintendent, and created a section of law outlining the responsibilities of principals, which include recommending the hiring of personnel to the superintendent. The bill moreover sought to more clearly define the responsibilities of school improvement teams. There is little evidence to date that the law has had a major effect on the day-to-day operation of traditional public schools in Rhode Island, however.

The law additionally altered the state’s accountability framework, requiring: the BOE to adopt an evaluation system for schools and districts, RIDE to conduct annual educational reviews of five districts per year, and schools and districts to submit to RIDE a three-year comprehensive district plan, and annual district action and school improvement plans.

The final reform law to pass created a fast-track program for the certification of principals in Rhode Island that does not require an advanced degree from a regionally accredited institution.

Additional Education Policies from 2019 – Present

Since 2019, there have been a few noteworthy state education policy developments, but these were not related to a broader movement to enact systemwide reform, but rather were one-off reform bills or a programmatic response to COVID-19.

In the last three legislative sessions, the General Assembly passed a few pieces of legislation which relate to teacher training and curriculum. The Right to Read Act was passed in 2019 and requires educators to

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120 At the elementary level, 74 percent of LEAs had high-quality ELA curriculum and 86 percent had high quality math curriculum. At the middle school and high school levels, these figures were somewhat lower—a respective 65 percent and 60 percent had high-quality ELA curriculum and a respective 59 percent and 51 percent had high-quality math curriculum. RIDE, 2021-2022 Curriculum List & Visualization Tool.

121 R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 089, 2019 – H 5008, Substitute B.

122 The law requires school improvement teams to “meet regularly,” assist in identifying students’ “educational needs,” make recommendations regarding a curriculum accommodation plan, and assist in both reviewing the school budget and developing a school improvement plan. R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 224, 2019 – H 6084 Substitute A.


124 All three plans are designed to build off each other; the district improvement plan sets a three-year vision for the district, the district action plan clarifies how, and with what resources, the district will work towards achieving that vision in the upcoming year, and the school improvement plan requires schools to establish school and student performance goals that are consistent with district policies. R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 224, 2019 – H 6084 Substitute A.

125 Fast-track principal certification requires a one-year, 300-hour internship at the school at which the prospective principal is currently employed, among other requirements. R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 117, 2019 – H 6085 Substitute A as Amended; RIDE, Fast Track Building Administrator Internship Guidelines and Guidance; RIDE, Certification Regulations Presentation, 2020; RIDE, Requirement for Full Certification – Administrators.
demonstrate “either proficiency in or awareness of the knowledge and practices of the Science of Reading and Structured Literacy” by the 2025-2026 school year.\textsuperscript{126} It also requires LEAs to provide professional learning in this field and educator preparation programs to incorporate this requirement into their programs of study.\textsuperscript{127} In 2021 and 2022, the General Assembly passed four bills which each required that a particular subject be added to students’ course of study: financial literacy, civics, African heritage and history, and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander history.\textsuperscript{128}

The Assembly additionally attempted to address the state’s shortage of ELL certified teachers in 2021 by requiring that RIDE streamline ELL teacher certification and provide for classes for current Rhode Island certified teachers to obtain ELL endorsement.\textsuperscript{129} The previous year, RIDE announced that it would begin reimbursing PPSD teachers for ELL certification costs.\textsuperscript{130} For 2021, RIDE reported that two cohorts, each totaling over 100 PPSD teachers, had received tuition reimbursement for ELL certification.\textsuperscript{131}

RIDE launched the Learning, Equity, and Accelerated Pathways (LEAP) Task Force in February 2021 in response to the student learning loss associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical closure of schools, and reliance on remote schooling. The task force produced recommendations including prioritizing summer learning opportunities—particularly for historically disadvantaged subgroups.\textsuperscript{132} RIDE used a portion of its federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) allocation to create a LEAP District Support Program, which provided matching grants for priority initiatives in districts that were particularly affected by the pandemic.\textsuperscript{133} In total, Rhode Island’s public elementary and

\textsuperscript{126} The initial law had a deadline of 2023-2024 but legislation passed by the 2022 General Assembly extended the deadline by two years. 2022, Senate Bill 2169 Substitute A; RIDE, The Rhode Island Right to Read Act; R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 155, 2019 – S 1036.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid. Since the passage of this legislation, RIDE has reported that it has provided professional learning for three cohorts of educators comprised of 160 teachers and administrators in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling. It has also developed professional development modules related to dyslexia and instruction, as well as guidance for LEAs regarding the trainings educators will need under this law. RIDE, “Studies in Resilience: A Report on the State of Education in Rhode Island, 2020-2021 School Year,” Updated January 2021.
\textsuperscript{128} The financial literacy legislation requires LEAs to offer a course aligned with state-developed standards, and the civics education bill requires LEAs to provide a half credit or course requirement and student civics project aligned with state-developed standards. The law requires LEAS to offer a unit of study in African heritage and history and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander history but enables LEAs to determine a unit. R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 31, 2021 – H 5491; RIDE, Financial Literacy; R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 220, 202 – H 5028 Substitute A as Amended; R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 288, 2021 – H 5679 as Amended; R.I. Gen. Assembly Press Release, Sen. Cano and Rep. Fenton-Fung’s legislation requiring Asian American history and culture be taught in schools signed into law, July 7, 2022; R.I. Gen. Assembly, 2022 – S 2910, Substitute A.
\textsuperscript{129} R.I. Pub. Laws, Chapter 296, H. 5829 Substitute A. Since September 24, 2020, Rhode Island has had certification reciprocity with 16 other states, including every other New England state; individuals with valid licenses in those states are exempt from taking Rhode Island required tests and not held to Rhode Island experience requirements. RIDE, Paths to Certification.
\textsuperscript{130} Ashley Cullinane, “RIDE, PPSD announce ESL certification reimbursement for Providence teachers,” WJAR 10, January 30, 2020.
\textsuperscript{132} Another chief recommendation of the Task Force was to close the “digital divide” through digital literacy programming as well as enhancing access to broadband and devices. RIDE, Learning, Equity & Accelerated Pathways (LEAP) Task Force Report, July 2021.
\textsuperscript{133} These districts are Central Falls, East Providence, Johnston, Newport, North Providence, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick, and Woonsocket. Ibid.
secondary education system received $646.2 million through three rounds of ESSER funding in 2020 and 2021. Of that total, $64.6 million was allocated to RIDE, while the rest flowed directly to the state’s LEAs.\textsuperscript{134}

Section VI of this report will delve further into the learning loss associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

\textsuperscript{134} National Conference of State Legislatures, \textit{Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Tracker}, January 25, 2022. $41.7 million of these funds were used by the Rhode Island General Assembly to balance the FY 2020 budget; in its supplemental FY 2020 budget, the Assembly swapped out general revenue funds it had already allocated for elementary and secondary education with funds supplied by the federal government in the first round of ESSER funding. RIPEC, “\textit{Rhode Island’s FY 2020 Supplemental Budget: The General Assembly Takes the First Step in Responding to Pandemic Fallout},” July 2020.
IV. Rhode Island’s Teachers

Teacher quality is the second greatest indicator of student outcomes after student background. Consequently, Section IV provides a comparative analysis of Rhode Island teachers, focusing on preparation and certification, salary, demographic features, and rates of chronic absenteeism.

Preparation and Certification

Rhode Island teacher preparation and certification trends generally mirror those of the nation, with a recent decline in state-certified teachers and a continued mismatch between certification concentration and needs. In 2020-2021, 478 individuals completed preparation programs with one of the state’s 11 teacher/administrator preparation program providers, of which 395 applied for and received state certification. These most recent completion and certification totals reflect sharp declines compared to totals three years prior, with 270 fewer individuals completing a program and 205 fewer individuals receiving certification than in 2017-2018, not accounting for individuals receiving preliminary certification through alternative pathways.

Moreover, there continues to be imbalance in certifications between secondary and elementary teachers, and at the secondary level, between math and science teachers and those certified in other subjects. Between 2018-2019 and 2020-2021, the number of Rhode Island-educated individuals certified to teach at the secondary level in core subjects (English, social studies, sciences, and mathematics) was only about two thirds of the number of individuals certified as regular classroom teachers at the elementary level (336 vs. 528). At the secondary level, there were 194 individuals certified to teach English and social studies between 2018-2019 and 2020-2021, compared to 142 individuals certified to teach one of the sciences or mathematics.

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136 Rhode Island’s public elementary and secondary system collectively employed 13,902 educators in the fall of 2020, including 11,572 teachers, 1,574 support professionals, 554 building administrators, and 202 district administrators. RIDE, RI State Report Card, 2020-2021.
137 Currently approved providers include Brown University, Johnson & Wales University, Rhode Island School of Progressive Education, Principal Residency Network, Providence College, Rhode Island School of Design, Salve Regina University, Roger Williams University, Teach for America, Rhode Island College, and the University of Rhode Island. RIDE, Educator Preparation Programs.
138 On a per capita basis, the number of individuals to graduate from teacher preparation programs and achieve certification by the state has historically mirrored national trends. In 2012-2013, both Rhode Island and the U.S. certified 0.08 percent of the population. National Center for Education Statistics, 2020 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 209.05; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020 5-Year Estimates; RIPEC Calculations.
139 RIDE, Educator Preparation Index. Across the U.S., elementary education has been, and continues to be, the most popular specialty area for prospective educators. In consequence, there are more individuals trained in this area than is required by the system. Madeline Will, “Fewer People Are Getting Teacher Degrees. Prep Programs Sound the Alarm,” Education Week, March 22, 2022.
140 Between the elementary and secondary levels, 236 Rhode Island-educated teachers were certified in special education during this period and 48 were certified in ELL. RIDE, Educator Preparation Index.
Salary

Teacher salary has been shown to affect student outcomes, though the extent to which salaries correlate with outcomes is the subject of debate. In Rhode Island, average annual teacher salary was $75,966 in 2020-2021. This exceeds the average annual salary in Rhode Island across all industries for 2020 of $60,471, and, as shown in Figure 2, exceeds the national average teacher salary, as well as that of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, by over $10,000 per year. Both Connecticut and Massachusetts, however, have higher average teacher salaries than Rhode Island, with Massachusetts teachers on average earning over $10,000 more per year. The average Rhode Island teacher’s salary is eighth highest among states, while Connecticut and Massachusetts rank fifth and second respectively.

Figure 2
Average Annual Teacher Salary in New England and the U.S., 2020-2021

Concerning teacher salary, it is worth considering both cost of living and the level of teacher education. According to a recent analysis, Rhode Island had the 14th highest cost of living in the U.S., but the lowest cost of living in New England. When a teacher earns a master’s degree, they are eligible for a pay increase in a large majority of districts across the country, and while 85.9 percent of Connecticut teachers and 80.7 percent of Massachusetts teachers possessed a master’s degree or greater in 2017-2018, the same was true for only 58.1 percent of Rhode Island teachers. Considering all factors, Rhode Island teachers appear to be well-compensated relative to other states.

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142 R.I. Department of Labor and Training, Rhode Island Covered Employment and Wages 2020-Statewide Employment by NAICS.

143 New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine respectively ranked ninth, tenth, and eleventh. Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, Cost of Living Data Series, First Quarter 2022.

New teachers earn significantly less than veteran teachers, however. In 2020-2021, new teachers earned an annual average salary of $44,592 in Rhode Island—$31,374 less than Rhode Island teachers overall ($75,966) and $17,680 less than Rhode Island’s average annual wage ($62,272). The relatively low pay received by starting teachers in Rhode Island is a national trend; Rhode Island ranked 12th highest among states in starting teacher salary in 2020-2021.

Race and Ethnicity

The race and ethnicity of teaching staff have been shown to influence student outcomes, with studies demonstrating that Black and Latino students with same-race teachers show improved outcomes, including higher test scores, attendance, and graduation levels. The gap between the proportions of non-white students and non-white teachers is particularly wide in Rhode Island, however. For the 2017-2018 school year, 42.3 percent of Rhode Island public school students were non-white, compared to 7.6 percent of teachers. This discrepancy is somewhat greater than the U.S. overall and ninth highest among states.

Figure 3
Race and Ethnicity of Rhode Island Students vs. Individuals Educated and Certified to Teach in Rhode Island from 2018-19 to 2020-21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Newly Certified Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Student data is from October 2021 whereas the data for educators was collected over three school years, ending in the spring of 2021. Source: RIDE, Educator Preparation Index; October Enrollment, 2020; RIPEC calculations

145 National Education Association, Teacher Salary Benchmarks, April 26, 2022; R.I. Dept. of Labor and Training, State of Rhode Island Ten Year Profile, 2012-2021; RIPEC calculations.
146 In the U.S., the average new teacher’s salary that year was $41,770. Massachusetts and Connecticut respectively ranked seventh and ninth highest. Ibid.
147 For instance: Jason T. Downer, Priscilla Goble, Sonya S. Myers, and Robert C. Panta, “Teacher-Child racial/ethnic match within pre-kindergarten classrooms and children’s early school adjustment,” Early Childhood Research Quarterly vol. 37 (Winter 2016): 26-38; Anna J. Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters, “Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement,” Economics of Education Review vol. 45 (April 2015): 44-52; Dan Goldhaber and Michael Hansen, “Race, Gender, and Teacher Testing: How Informative a Tool is Teacher Licensure Testing?,” American Educational Research Journal, June 5, 2017; Stephen B. Holt and Seth Gershenson, “The Impact of Teacher Demographic Representation on Student Attendance and Suspensions,” IZA Discussion Paper no. 9554, December 2015. Interestingly, gender has not been shown to have the same impact on student outcomes. Results are inconclusive at best, with one recent study finding that there seems to be neither positive nor negative effects from a student-teacher gender match at the elementary level, but at the middle level there is a “small” impact, particularly regarding math achievement for female students. NaYoung Hwang and Brian Fitzpatrick, “Student-Teacher Gender Matching and Academic Achievement,” September 1, 2021.
148 Both categories include Hispanics of any race. There was a difference of 34.7 percentage points between Rhode Island students of color and Rhode Island teachers of color, compared to a 31.6 percentage point difference percent nationwide. Those states with the lowest discrepancy also tend to be those states with the smallest percentage of nonwhite students, including Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire, which respectively had the first, second, and fifth smallest discrepancies between non-white students and non-white teachers in the U.S. in the 2017-2018 school year, and the third, first, and fourth smallest percentages of non-white students that year. National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2017-2018; Digest of Education Statistics, 2020. Table 203.70; RIPEC calculations.
Detailed in Figure 3, more recent data on the race and ethnicity of individuals educated and certified to teach in Rhode Island between 2019 and 2021 indicate that this racial disparity is not poised to reverse. While 5.5 percent of individuals did not report their race or ethnicity, there was nevertheless a clear overrepresentation of white individuals, who comprised 80.7 percent of newly certified educators, as compared to 53.2 percent of students who are white, and an underrepresentation of all other racial/ethnic groups, except for Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islanders. Over a quarter of Rhode Island students were Hispanic in 2021, compared to 5.3 percent of Rhode Island’s newly certified teachers, and while 8.9 percent of Rhode Island students were Black, only 1.6 percent of newly certified teachers were Black.

**Chronic Teacher Absenteeism**

Rhode Island historically has had high levels of teacher absenteeism, which studies show can have a substantial negative effect on student outcomes. A study of the 2015-2016 school year from the federal Civil Rights Data Collection found that, among the states, Rhode Island had the third highest rate of teachers who were absent more than ten days in the school year. In an effort to address this issue, Rhode Island included chronic teacher absenteeism in its ESSA accountability framework—the only state to have done so as of 2020.

Rates of chronic absenteeism have increased slightly since the onset of the pandemic. In 2020-2021, Rhode Island’s rate of chronic teacher absenteeism—defined as being absent ten percent or more of school days (at least 18 days)—was 5.9 percent, marginally down from 6.0 percent in 2019-2020 but still greater than the 5.5 percent rate reported in 2018-2019. This is on par with national trends; 72 percent of public schools surveyed nationwide reported an increase in chronic teacher absenteeism during the pandemic, with 37 percent reporting a large increase.

Rhode Island districts reported widely different chronic teacher absenteeism rates for 2020-2021, as displayed in Figure 4. While two urban districts, Central Falls and Providence, have relatively high levels of chronic teacher absenteeism, two other urban districts, Woonsocket and Pawtucket, have levels of absenteeism below the statewide total. Similarly, while two of the state’s most affluent districts, Barrington and East Greenwich, have relatively low levels of chronic absenteeism, other affluent districts, such as Smithfield and Narragansett, rank among those districts with the state’s highest absenteeism levels. It is possible that chronic absences by a relatively small numbers of teachers could skew these

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150 Rhode Island’s rate was 41 percent. Nevada ranked first (50 percent), and Hawaii ranked second (48 percent). Alex Harwin, “How Many Teachers Are Chronically Absent in Your State?,” EdWeek, June 5, 2018.

151 Michael Hansen and Diana Quintero, “We should be focusing on absenteeism among teachers, not just students,” Brookings Institute, January 27, 2020.


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numbers in smaller districts. Otherwise, the reasons underlying these disparities among districts remain unclear.

**Figure 4**

Rates of Chronic Teacher Absenteeism by Rhode Island District, 2020-21

Note: Foster and Glocester reported no instances of chronic absenteeism; a teacher is considered chronically absent if they miss more than 10 percent of all school days a year (more than 18 of 180 days).

Source: RIDE, Report Cards
V. Student Enrollment and Demographic Trends

The section outlines key enrollment and demographic characteristics of Rhode Island’s K-12 student body, comparing the state to the New England region and the nation, showing change over time, and comparing Rhode Island LEAs to one another.

Enrollment

As shown in Figure 5, public school enrollment in Rhode Island has been remarkably stable over the last decade, save for the last two years in result of the pandemic. In October 2019, total public school enrollment in Rhode Island—which includes PreK students—only exceeded October 2011 enrollment by 603 students, a 0.4 percent increase. Student enrollment of 138,556 in October 2021 represented a decline of nearly 5,000 students (3.5 percent) from 2019. RIDE has reported that the system’s youngest students contributed the most to declining enrollment, while leaders of private schools and homeschool movements have reported increased enrollment.

**Figure 5**

**Enrollment in Rhode Island Public Schools, October 2011 - October 2021**

137,400
136,401
135,084
134,574
133,856
133,230
133,291
133,091
132,629
127,560
126,075

Source: RIDE, October Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>District Schools</th>
<th>Charter Public Schools</th>
<th>State Schools &amp; Collaborative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>137,400</td>
<td>8,427</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>136,401</td>
<td>9,014</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>135,084</td>
<td>9,694</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>134,574</td>
<td>10,537</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

154 Rhode Island public school enrollment peaked in 1971-1972 (190,696 students) and decreased until reaching a low of 133,450 in 1985-1986. In the early 1990s, this figure began to see year-over-year increases, growing by 10.5 percent between 1990-91 and 1997-98 (from 137,907 to 152,337). RIPEC, “1987 Taxpayers Guide to Public School Finance: Trends and Prospects in Rhode Island,” April 1987. RIPEC, “Results: Education in Rhode Island,” 1999. There were 2,832 four- and five-year old children enrolled in either Head Start or Rhode Island PreK as of October 2021, with 664 of those children attending PreK in a public school setting, 782 attending PreK in a child care program setting, and 918 attending PreK at a Head Start agency. 2022 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. 1,591 PreK students were included in the state count of public school students in 2021-2022. RIDE, October Enrollment data.

Another trend of note is the growth in charter public school enrollment; between 2011 and 2019, the percentage of public school students enrolled in a traditional public school district decreased (from 96.1 percent to 92.4 percent), the portion attending state schools or the state’s urban collaborative remained stable, and the portion attending public charter schools increased from 2.5 percent to 6.3 percent. While districts overall experienced a 4.9 percent decrease in enrollment between 2019 and 2021, charters collectively saw increased enrollment, at least in part due to newly authorized charter school seats.156

Enrollment by LEA

The number of students enrolled in Rhode Island’s 66 public LEAs varies sharply. In the fall of 2021, nearly half of all public school students were enrolled in one of the state’s eight largest LEAs, all of which are municipal school districts.157 Rhode Island’s largest LEA, Providence, accounts for 15.6 percent of all public school students in the state, and has over twice as many students as the state’s second largest LEA, Cranston.158 At the other end of the spectrum, the state’s eight smallest LEAs together accounted for 0.7 percent of all public school students in the state in October 2021.159

Student Demographics

There is no greater determinant of student outcomes than student background and demographic characteristics.160 The demographic characteristics analyzed below—race/ethnicity, language, poverty, special education status, and head of household educational attainment—have all been shown to be important predictors of student outcomes.161

Three important trends affecting both student outcomes and the needs of students are of note. First, Rhode Island public schools have a higher percentage of historically disadvantaged subgroups than other New England states but tend to have a lower percentage than the U.S. overall. Second, the demographic characteristics of Rhode Island students has shifted substantially in the last few decades. Third, there is staggering diversity among Rhode Island LEAs in terms of demographic composition, with a much higher proportion of students from historically disadvantaged subgroups represented in urban districts.

Race/Ethnicity

Figure 6 compares the racial/ethnic breakdown of Rhode Island public school students in 2021 to other New England states and the U.S. Over half (53.2 percent) of Rhode Island public school students are white,

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157 In descending order, the state’s eight largest LEAs are Providence, Cranston, Warwick, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, East Providence, Cumberland, and Coventry. RIDE, October Enrollment data.
158 Cranston’s enrollment in the fall of 2021 was 10,258, compared to Providence enrollment of 21,656. Ibid.
159 In ascending order, the state’s eight smallest LEAs were the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, Urban Collaborative, Providence Preparatory Charter, New Shoreham, Nuestro Mundo Public Charter, SouthSide Charter School, and Sheila Skip Nowell Leadership Academy. Ibid.
a larger proportion than in the U.S. (45.8 percent) and Connecticut but smaller than in Massachusetts and much smaller than the remaining New England states. Hispanic students comprise Rhode Island’s second largest racial/ethnic student group, making up over a quarter (28.6 percent) of students and exceeding the proportion of Hispanic students in the nation and region. The proportion of Ocean State students who are Black is significantly smaller than in the U.S. (8.9 percent vs. 15.0 percent) and ranks third highest in New England.

Hispanic students comprise Rhode Island’s second largest racial/ethnic student group, making up over a quarter (28.6 percent) of students and exceeding the proportion of Hispanic students in the nation and region. The proportion of Ocean State students who are Black is significantly smaller than in the U.S. (8.9 percent vs. 15.0 percent) and ranks third highest in New England.

The racial/ethnic breakdown of Rhode Island public school students has shifted dramatically over the past 20 years. Figure 7 displays that breakdown in five-year increments from 2001 to 2021, highlighting that the portion of Rhode Island students who are white decreased by approximately 20 percentage points in that period (from 73.3 percent to 53.2 percent), while the percentage of Hispanic students nearly doubled (from 14.8 percent to 28.6 percent). The only other racial/ethnic category to change by more than one percentage point in this period is multi-racial; the category was not introduced until 2010 and saw an increase from 2.4 percent to 5.0 percent between 2011 and 2021.
While the state overall has seen a large shift in its racial/ethnic breakdown, Figure 8 highlights the dramatic difference in this breakdown across districts—at least in part a product of racial segregation practices seen in Rhode Island and across the United States. White students comprise at least 80 percent of students in 20 districts and make up fewer than half of the student body in six districts. PPSD and Central Falls School District have the state’s smallest proportion of white students; in PPSD, 7.9 percent of students are white and in Central Falls the proportion of white students is 16.5 percent. Providence, by far the state’s largest district, has a smaller number of white students than 21 other districts, including districts that are a fraction of its size. For instance, Burrillville, with total student enrollment roughly one-tenth of that of Providence, had 191 more white students than did Providence in 2020-2021. Similarly, while Hispanic students make up about two-thirds of the student body in Providence and over half the student body in Central Falls, Hispanic students make up fewer than ten percent of students in 22 districts and fewer than five percent of students in ten districts. Only seven districts have a Black population that exceeds six percent of total enrollment and Black students comprise more than a quarter of the student body in only one district, Pawtucket.

Note: The multi-racial category was not introduced into this data set until 2010
Source: RIDE, October Enrollment; RIPEC calculations

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162 For historical information on racial segregation in Rhode Island, see here: Social Policy Hub for Equity Research in Education, 2020 Rhode Island Education Policy Primer. Much has been written over the last half century on racial segregation and schools in the United States generally. For a recent report on the continued segregation of neighborhoods and schools, see U.S. Government Accountability Office, “K-12 Education: Student Population Has Significantly Diversified, but Many Schools Remain Divided Along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines,” July 14, 2022.

163 More than 90 percent of the students in Little Compton, Foster, Scituate, Jamestown, Glocester, Foster-Glocester, and Exeter-West Greenwich are white. Fewer than half of the students in Cranston, Woonsocket, Newport, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Providence are white.

164 Burrillville student enrollment totaled 2,128 and Providence total enrollment was 21,656. RIDE, October Enrollment data; RIPEC calculations.

165 Of those LEAs where fewer than 5.0 percent of students are Hispanic, there are four where the data was not released by RIDE: Little Compton, Foster, Jamestown, and Glocester. The remaining six districts where fewer than 10.0 percent of students are Hispanic are Scituate, Charlevoix, Narragansett, Foster-Glocester, Tiverton, and Exeter-West Greenwich.

166 These districts are Pawtucket, Central Falls, Providence, North Providence, Woonsocket, Newport, and East Providence.
Figure 8
Race/Ethnicity of Rhode Island Public School Students by District, 2021

[Bar chart showing race/ethnicity distribution by district, including percentages for American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Multi-Racial, Black, and White categories.]

Note: Some LEA totals do not equal 100 percent because the data were suppressed in cases where there were limited numbers of students identifying under one racial/ethnic subgroup. Additionally, according to RIDE data, 94 percent of Central Falls students were American Indian or Alaskan Native, but the U.S. Census estimates that 0.5 percent of Central Falls' population was American Indian or Alaskan Native in 2021. It therefore seems probable that RIDE data is incorrect on this front and so this data point has been excluded.

Source: RIDE, October Enrollment; RIPEC calculations
English Proficiency

Over one in ten (11.3 percent) Rhode Island public school students were limited English proficient (LEP) in 2020-2021, which is high relative to the region, somewhat greater than the nation, and significantly higher than the state total just a few years previous. The number of LEP students in Rhode Island has grown in recent years at a remarkable pace. Figure 9, which demonstrates this change in five-year increments from 2006 to 2021, shows that the percentage of LEP students more than doubled in 15 years, from one-in-twenty students to over one-in-ten. From 2016 to 2021 alone, the number of LEP students in Rhode Island grew by 43.6 percent, from 10,888 to 15,638.

![Figure 9: Proportion of LEP Public School Students in Rhode Island, 2006-2021](image)

As with race/ethnicity, there is a stark difference in the concentration of LEP students across Rhode Island districts, with far higher percentages of LEP students in the state’s urban core. Figure 10 shows districts in order of lowest to highest percentage of LEP students in October 2021, though 11 districts are excluded because there were too few LEP students in those districts for the data to be made public. In contrast, 44.4 percent of students in Central Falls are LEP, as are nearly a third (32.9 percent) of Providence students. Combined, over half—53.2 percent—of all LEP students in the state are enrolled in Providence or Central Falls. Over ten percent of students are LEP in Woonsocket, Newport, and Pawtucket.

Rhode Island’s proportion of LEP students was greater than in Massachusetts (10.5 percent) and Connecticut (8.3 percent), and much greater than in Maine (3.8 percent), New Hampshire (2.8 percent), and Vermont (2.0 percent). LEP data from 2021 for the United States is not available, but, in 2019—the most recent year for which there is national data—the Ocean State only slightly exceeded the nation in this regard (10.7 percent vs. 10.4 percent). State data was sourced from state data portals. U.S. data is from National Center for Education Statistics, 2009 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 204.20. While this report uses the term LEP, several different terms are used by various education professionals and policymakers to identify the same group of students, including English as a Second Language (ESL) students, English language learners (ELLs), and multilingual learners (MLLs).

LEP students were not counted as part of October enrollment counts until the 2005-2006 school year.

These districts are Burrillville, Charlesto, Exeter-West Greenwich, Foster, Foster-Glocester, Glocester, Jamestown, Little Compton, Narragansett, Scituate, and Tiverton.

Providence had 7,117 LEP students in October 2021 and Central Falls had 1,119, for a total of 8,316. The remaining 7,322 LEP students in the state were enrolled other LEAs.
Figure 10
Proportion of LEP Public School Students by Rhode Island District, 2021

Note: The following 18 districts were excluded from this figure because the number of LEP students in each was not great enough for release of the data: Burrillville, Charlestown, Exeter-West Greenwich, Foster, Foster-Glocester, Glocester, Jamestown, Little Compton, Narragansett, Scituate, and Tiverton

Source: RIDE October Enrollment data; RIPEC calculations
Poverty

There is no consistent interstate measure of poverty among public school students, but data on childhood poverty provides an adequate window into how student poverty compares across states.\textsuperscript{172} Figure 11 shows that there are lower levels of childhood poverty in the New England region than in the nation overall, but that, of New England states, Rhode Island has the highest level of child poverty (15.6 percent).

![Figure 11](image)

**Figure 11**
Children Under 18 Below the Poverty Level in New England and U.S., 2020

Rhode Island’s student poverty levels have not undergone notable change in the last decade—with the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rising only slightly from 46.0 to 47.7 percent between 2012 and 2019.\textsuperscript{173} However, as Figure 12 shows, there was stark difference in the proportion of FRPL-eligible students across districts, with significantly higher percentages in urban districts. Over nine-in-ten students in Central Falls were FRPL-eligible in 2019, while the same was true for more than four-in-five Providence students and more than two-thirds of students in Woonsocket, Pawtucket, and Newport. Well over a quarter (29.4 percent) of all FRPL-eligible students in the state in 2019 were in Providence, and over half—51.5 percent—were enrolled in just five districts: Providence, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Pawtucket, and Newport.

172 Until the last few years, student poverty was tracked by participation in the federal free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program, but FRPL data is no longer collected in every state because of the introduction of a community eligibility provision that expanded access to FRPL in high-poverty districts to all students regardless of family income level. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued guidance to states that FRPL data should not serve as a marker of student poverty. To be eligible, a student’s family must be at or below 185.0 percent of the federal poverty level. In 2021, the federal poverty level for a family of four was $26,500. RIDE has continued to require LEAs to submit FRPL data regardless of an LEA’s participation in the community eligibility provision for the purpose of determining poverty level in the state’s education funding formula.

173 RIDE, October Enrollment data. Data collection issues related to the pandemic make FRPL data from 2021, and to a certain extent 2020, unreliable. Data for FRPL-eligible students is collected by RIDE from two sources: The RI Department of Human Services and FRPL-eligibility forms that LEAs collect from students’ heads of household. Due to the pandemic, many schools began serving free meals to all students, which decreased the incentive for household heads/LEAs to fill out/collect this form data. The Rhode Island General Assembly is requiring RIDE to develop a poverty measure for use in the state’s education funding formula that does not rely on school nutrition program administration by October of this year. RIPEC, “Rhode Island’s FY 2023 Enacted Budget and Fiscal Outlook,” September 2022.
Special Education

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) Part B requires schools to provide specialized services for students between ages three and 21 with a range of disabilities which include, for instance, autism, deafness, and vision impairment. In the 2007-2008 school year, Rhode Island ranked first among U.S. states in the percentage of children eligible for IDEA Part B services (19.7 percent, compared to the U.S. total of 13.4 percent). Rhode Island maintained the highest IDEA Part B eligibility rate in the nation until the 2011-2012 school year, but by 2020-2021, Rhode Island’s IDEA Part B eligibility rate had declined to 17.2 percent—eighth highest among states and second lowest in New England. Figure 13 displays this change, comparing IDEA Part B service eligibility rates in the New England states and the U.S. overall in 2007-2008 and 2020-2021. No data have been presented that shows precisely why the percentage of

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174 IDEA Part B also provides partial funding for these programs. U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Individuals with Disabilities Act Services.

175 National Center for Education Statistics, 2009 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 204-52.

176 National Center for Education Statistics, 2013 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 204-70.
students identified as requiring special education services in Rhode Island has fallen, but the 2000s saw
the introduction of two overlapping policy frameworks called Response to Intervention and the Multi-
tiered System of Supports, through which some students are referred for screening, evaluation, and/or
treatment rather than for special education services.177

Figure 14 highlights that there is significant variance across districts in the proportion of students with an
individualized education program (IEP), though to a lesser extent than the demographic features analyzed
above.178 Moreover, while the state’s less affluent urban districts tend to have higher rates of students
with IEPs, there is not as clear of a divide between urban and other districts as is the case with other
demographic characteristics. Woonsocket had the highest proportion of students with IEPs, and West
Warwick and Central Falls were tied for second highest. Providence has a smaller proportion of students
with IEPs than both the state overall and several suburban and rural districts, however.

177 As evidenced by recent legislative efforts to create an Ombudsman Office of Special Education, at least some families in the
state believe they are not able to access adequate special education services. Memo from Education Law Team, Rhode Island
Center for Justice to Justine Oliva, Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, RE: Disparities in Special Education Eligibility Rates
178 IEPs are designed to ensure that students who have a disability receive the specialized instruction and services required under
IDEA Part B. They lay out the instruction, supports, and services required for a student to succeed.
In part explaining the higher proportions of students with IEPs in most urban communities compared to rural/suburban communities, academic studies have shown that, nationwide, nonwhite students are more likely to be identified by their teachers as requiring special education services than white students. The policies within a given LEA also can impact IEP rates, however. In Providence, IEP rates have fallen year-over-year between 2007 and 2016 and have consistently been lower than the state total since 2014.

Of additional note is the disparity in IEP status by sex; there were about twice as many male public school students in Rhode Island with an IEP than female students in 2021 (66.5 percent vs. 33.5 percent). This is on par with a longstanding national as well as statewide trend, and while some observers have argued that it is caused by biological difference, most studies point to issues with identification, arguing that girls

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180 RIDE, October Enrollment data.
tend to be under-identified due to gender bias and the different ways that symptoms of learning disabilities can present in girls.\textsuperscript{181}

**Head of Household Educational Attainment**

Figure 15—which compares New England states and the U.S. in terms of the highest educational attainment level of children’s head of household in 2019—shows that children in Rhode Island overall have household heads with higher educational attainment levels than children in the U.S., but that the Ocean State ranks low in this measure on a regional basis. Every state in New England had a higher proportion of children with a household head who had a bachelor’s and/or graduate degree than in the U.S. overall, but of New England states, Rhode Island ranked ahead of only Maine in this regard. In this measure, Rhode Island trailed particularly far behind its two neighboring states; 39.4 percent of Rhode Island children had a head of household with a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2019, compared to 46.8 percent of Connecticut children and 50.3 percent of Massachusetts children.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure15.png}
\caption{Children by Household Head’s Education Attainment Level in New England and U.S., 2019}
\end{figure}

V. Student Outcomes

Section V analyzes education outcomes in Rhode Island across key metrics and in a regional and national context, highlighting that Rhode Island students underperform the region and are generally on par with the nation. It further examines the marked decrease in student outcomes attributable to the pandemic, highlighting low proficiency rates—particularly in math—and staggering rates of chronic absenteeism. Finally, this section compares the education outcomes of students across districts and subgroups and demonstrates the concerning disparity on both fronts.

Standardized Assessments

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

In terms of assessments, NAEP is the best measure of student achievement over time, as Rhode Island has administered this assessment since the 1980s. As the only required standardized assessment taken by students across the country, NAEP is the only assessment that enables reliable interstate comparison. This test cannot be used to make comparisons across districts, however, as it is administered to a random sampling of students.

Student Proficiency over Time

Over the past two decades, Rhode Island saw an increase in proficiency levels on both the reading and math portions of NAEP. Since 2000, fourth grade reading proficiency rates in Rhode Island saw a low of 29.7 percent in 2005 and a high of 40.4 percent in 2015, before falling to 35.4 percent in 2019—the most recent year in which the test was administered. Similarly, eighth grade reading proficiency rates were as low as 27.2 percent in 2007 and as high as 37.4 percent in 2017. On the math portion of NAEP, proficiency doubled at the fourth-grade level, from 22.1 percent in 2000 to 42.5 percent in 2015, before falling slightly to 40.4 percent in 2019. Eighth grade math proficiency saw somewhat smaller gains, from a low of 21.7 percent in 2000 to a high of 36.0 percent in 2013, while the most recent proficiency rate was 29.5 percent. In terms of the general increases in math and reading proficiency levels on NAEP, Rhode Island trends mirror those of the nation.\(^\text{182}\)

Student Proficiency Regionally and Nationally

As Figure 16 shows, slightly more than a third of Rhode Island fourth and eighth graders (35.4 percent and 35.0 percent) demonstrated proficiency on NAEP in reading in 2019, the most recent year for which data are available. For both grades, Rhode Island’s reading proficiency rates were somewhat greater than the U.S. overall but lower than every other New England state. Rhode Island ranked 22\(^{\text{nd}}\) highest among states in fourth grade reading and 17\(^{\text{th}}\) highest for eighth grade reading.

\(^{182}\) The Nation’s Report Card.
On the 2019 NAEP, Rhode Island students posted lower math proficiency rates than every other New England state and somewhat underperformed the nation in eighth grade math, as shown in Figure 17. In fourth grade math, there was no statistically significant difference between the proficiency rate of Rhode Island (40.5 percent) and the U.S. overall (40.4 percent), and Rhode Island ranked 24th highest among the states. In eighth grade math, the Ocean State posted a lower proficiency rate than did the U.S. overall (29.5 percent vs. 32.9 percent) and ranked 36th among the states.
Student Proficiency by Race and Ethnicity

Figures 18 and 19 depict the racial and ethnic gap in student proficiency levels on the 2019 NAEP for Rhode Island and U.S. students in math and reading, showing the proficiency rates for Rhode Island’s three largest ethnic/racial subgroups: white, Hispanic, and Black. Among Rhode Island students, there is a wide difference in 2019 NAEP proficiency rates across race and ethnicity, with particularly low proficiency rates for Black and Hispanic students. Similar gaps are present across the U.S., but these gaps were greater in Rhode Island than in most states for Hispanic students, particularly for reading proficiency. Rhode Island had the ninth highest white/Hispanic proficiency gap for fourth grade reading and third highest for eight grade reading, behind only Massachusetts and Maryland with respect to the latter, in 2019.

![Figure 18](image)

**Figure 18**

**Rhode Island and U.S. Reading NAEP Proficiency Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2019**

![Figure 19](image)

**Figure 19**

**Rhode Island and U.S. Math NAEP Proficiency Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2019**

Source: National Assessment of Education Progress Report Card, Reading

Student Proficiency by Other Subgroups

As depicted in Figures 20 and 21, there were wide proficiency gaps on the 2019 NAEP for Rhode Island students with disabilities, ELL students, and FRPL-eligible students. Only in fourth grade math did more than a quarter of students from one of these subgroups—students who are FRPL eligible—demonstrate proficiency. ELL students had the lowest proficiency rates of any student subgroup, with about one in ten achieving proficiency in fourth grade reading and math and fewer than one in fifty achieving proficiency in eighth grade reading and math. These figures also show that—while Rhode Island’s total student proficiency rates are generally on par with those of the U.S.—the state generally has lower proficiency rates for historically disadvantaged subgroups, particularly ELL students.
The RICAS

While the RICAS does not permit comparison to the rest of the country like NAEP, it typically enables statewide comparison to Massachusetts and is the best means of comparing elementary and middle school student proficiency across Rhode Island LEAs. It moreover provides more recent data than NAEP, which was last conducted in 2019 and therefore does not show the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on student outcomes.

Comparison to Massachusetts

In a typical year, RICAS results may be directly compared to MCAS results, but in 2020-2021—the year for which the most recent RICAS results are available—direct comparison is not sound because a shortened version of the test was administered in Massachusetts, whereas the RICAS was administered in full. In 2019-2020, the test was not administered in either state as the U.S. Department of Education waived ESSA testing requirements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent comparable year, therefore, is 2018-2019, when 52 percent of Massachusetts third-eighth graders demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the MCAS, compared to 39 percent of Rhode Island third-eighth graders demonstrating proficiency on the ELA portion of the RICAS—a difference of thirteen percentage points. In math, the achievement gap between Massachusetts and Rhode Island students was even greater; Massachusetts

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183 Massachusetts Department of Education, [MCAS 2021 Results Release FAQs](#).
posted a 49 percent proficiency rate, nearly twenty percentage points greater than the 30 percent proficiency rate posted in Rhode Island.\textsuperscript{184}

\textit{Student Proficiency Over Time and the Effect of COVID-19}

As Figure 22 indicates, student proficiency on the RICAS fell sharply in Rhode Island between 2019 and 2021, particularly in math. The ELA proficiency rate for all students taking the test—public school students grade three through eight—fell by over five percentage points in this time frame, to roughly one-third (33.2 percent), while math proficiency fell by nearly ten percentage points, to roughly one-fifth (20.1 percent). The state had seen improvement between 2017-2018—the first year the RICAS was administered—and 2018-2019, but math proficiency rates in 2020-2021 were still about 7.0 percentage points below 2017-2018 levels. RIDE has moreover reported that the learning loss demonstrated in the RICAS is likely understated due to a drop-off in participation rates—from approximately 99 percent to about 88 percent between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school year.\textsuperscript{185} RIDE has also stated that the learning loss experienced by some historically disadvantaged subgroups is likely understated given the steeper decline in RICAS participation among these subgroups than among all students.\textsuperscript{186}

The learning loss evident in Rhode Island’s most recent RICAS scores is hardly particular to Rhode Island; student outcomes fell around the country in this period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have demonstrated the link between learning loss during the pandemic and the related closure of physical classrooms and reliance on remote

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{ricas.png}
\caption{RICAS ELA & Math Proficiency Rates 2017-18 to 2020-21}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{184} Massachusetts Department of Education, School and District Profiles, \textit{Next Generation MCAS Tests 2019}; RIDE, Assessment Data Portal.
\textsuperscript{185} RICAS ELA participation fell from 98.6 percent to 88.7 percent (9.9 percentage point drop). RICAS math participation fell from 98.7 percent to 88.0 percent (10.7 percentage point drop). RIDE Presentation to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, \textit{English Language Arts and Mathematics Assessment Results 2021}, November 2, 2021.
\textsuperscript{186} Participation rates went down at greater levels than average for economically disadvantaged students, students with special needs, and homeless students. Participation rates went up for LEP students, and there was not particular variability among other racial/ethnic groups. RIDE Presentation to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, \textit{English Language Arts and Mathematics Assessment Results 2021}, November 2, 2021.
schooling.\textsuperscript{187} Researchers also have found greater drops in proficiency among non-white students and students in high-poverty schools, who were, on whole, more likely to have their physical classrooms closed for longer periods.\textsuperscript{188} Additional research has shown that the closure of schools compounded with other stresses related to the pandemic to negatively affect the mental health of children nationwide, and in Rhode Island particularly, which, in turn, has been shown to hinder students’ educational achievements.\textsuperscript{189}

\textit{Student Proficiency Across Districts}

Consistent with historical trends, proficiency rates on the 2021-2022 RICAS varied widely across school districts. Figure 23, which shows the ELA proficiency rate across districts, highlights that fewer than one-in-five students demonstrated proficiency in six districts—West Warwick, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, Woonsocket, and Central Falls—and fewer than one-in-ten students (7.7 percent) demonstrated proficiency in Central Falls. In comparison, over half of students demonstrated proficiency in 13 districts and over two-thirds of students demonstrated proficiency in two districts. Importantly, some of the districts with the state’s lowest proficiency rates on the ELA portion of the RICAS may have had even lower rates if they had higher levels of participation. Seven districts had participation rates lower than 85.0 percent, a rate sufficiently low such that RIDE has noted that “results may have been different if more students had taken the test.” Of those districts, two were also among the districts with proficiency rates under 20 percent—Woonsocket (73.9 percent participation) and West Warwick (70.1 percent participation).\textsuperscript{190}

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. One survey in January 2021 of over 600 districts across the U.S. found that 27 percent of white fourth graders had no access to in-person learning, compared to 68 percent of Asian students, 58 percent of Black students, and 56 percent of Hispanic students. Matt Barnum, “The federal government finally has data on schooling during COVID. Here are 3 key takeaways,” March 24, 2021. The long-term trend NAEP—which measures fourth grade math and reading proficiency—found declines among all students between 2020 and 2022, with greater decreases among students who were lower-performing prior to the pandemic. The Nation’s Report Card, NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics, 2022.


\textsuperscript{190} The remaining four districts with ELA proficiency rates below 20 percent had participation rates in the bottom half of districts, ranging from 87.8 percent in Providence to 91.3 percent in Central Falls.
\end{flushleft}
Figure 24 shows similarly large inter-district gaps in math proficiency, though with overall proficiency levels far lower than in ELA. In each of the six districts with the state’s lowest ELA proficiency rates, fewer than one-in-ten students demonstrated proficiency in math and in three districts—Central Falls, West Warwick, and Woonsocket—the proficiency rate was not made publicly available because fewer than one-in-twenty students demonstrated proficiency. On the other end of the spectrum, seven districts had proficiency rates exceeding 40 percent. As with ELA, the math proficiency rates of some of the state’s lowest performing districts may have been lower if those districts had higher participation rates; West Warwick, Woonsocket, and Newport were among the ten districts to post participation rates below RIDE’s 85.0 percent threshold.

191 Participation rates in these districts were 69.0 percent, 71.9 percent, and 84.5 percent, respectively. With respective participation rates of 87.0 percent and 88.7 percent, Central Falls and Providence were only marginally above the threshold, while Pawtucket’s participation rate (89.8 percent) was in the bottom half of districts.
Although hardly the only determinant of a district’s proficiency levels, there is clear correlation between district proficiency and the percentage of the student body from historically disadvantaged subgroups. The six districts with the state’s lowest ELA and math proficiency rates—Central Falls, Providence, Pawtucket, Newport, Woonsocket, and West Warwick—also have the six highest proportions of FRPL-eligible students in the state. Five of the six lowest-scoring districts also have the state’s five highest proportions of nonwhite students (West Warwick ranks 11th), and the same five districts have the state’s five highest proportions of LEp students (West Warwick ranks 14th). Woonsocket, West Warwick, Central Falls, and Newport additionally have the four highest proportions of students with IEPs in the state (Pawtucket ranks sixth and Providence ranks 18th).

The SAT

While the RICAS offers the best means of comparing proficiency rates across the state at the elementary and middle school levels, the SAT enables comparison at the high school level (11th grade). Like the RICAS, the most recent SAT data for Rhode Island also demonstrates the effect of the pandemic on student outcomes.
Student Proficiency Over Time and the Effect of COVID-19

Student proficiency rates on the SAT fell between the 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 school years, though not to the same extent as RICAS proficiency rates. As shown in Figure 25, ELA proficiency on the SAT dropped by a marginal 2.2 percentage points while there was a somewhat greater decline in math—4.8 percentage points. While nearly half (48.3 percent) of Rhode Island’s test takers showed proficiency in ELA, only roughly a quarter (26.4 percent) demonstrated proficiency in math. As with the RICAS, RIDE has reported that the pandemic-related learning loss evidenced by SAT proficiency rates is likely understated due to a steep decline in participation. In both subjects, moreover, there was a sharper decline in participation among students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and ELL students than for students overall.192

Student Proficiency Across Districts

As displayed in Figures 26 and 27, the wide disparity in student outcomes across districts as evidenced by the RICAS is also seen in SAT proficiency rates. Five of the six districts with the state’s lowest RICAS proficiency rates in 2020-2021 also have the lowest proficiency rates on the ELA portion of the SAT—Central Falls, Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Providence, and Newport—with Central Falls posting particularly low rates. These five districts are moreover among the ten districts in the state with participation rates below 85.0 percent, and which therefore may have even lower proficiency levels than reported.193 Student proficiency rates on the math portion of the SAT similarly varied widely across districts and were generally lower than ELA across the board. Fewer than one-in-ten students were proficient in math in Woonsocket and Pawtucket, and in Central Falls the actual proficiency rate was not released because it fell under the 5.0 percent threshold required for confidentiality. Comparatively, over half of students demonstrated proficiency in five districts. Twelve districts posted participation rates that were low enough to affect the data’s reliability (below 85.0 percent), including six of the lowest scoring districts.194

192 On the ELA portion of the SAT, participation fell from 95.2 percent in 2018-2019 to 86.2 percent in 2020-2021 (a 9.0 percentage point drop). Math participation similarly declined by 9.1 percentage points, from 94.8 percent to 85.7 percent. RIDE Presentation to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, English Language Arts and Mathematics Assessment Results 2021, November 2, 2021.
193 All five had participation rates below 80 percent and Woonsocket (72.7 percent), Central Falls (75.5 percent), Newport (77.6 percent), and Pawtucket (79.1 percent) had the four lowest participation rates in the state, while Providence ranked sixth (79.6 percent), after Warwick (79.3 percent).
194 These districts were: East Providence, Newport, Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and Central Falls.
Figure 26
SAT ELA Proficiency Rate by District, 2020-2021

Note: New Shoreham data were not released because the reporting size did not meet the minimum necessary to ensure confidentiality (50 students). The following districts had participation rates lower than 85.0 percent, under which threshold RIDE has noted that "results may have been different if more students had taken the test": North Providence (84.8 percent), North Kingstown (83.0 percent), Portsmouth (82.3 percent), West Warwick (81.8 percent), East Providence (81.0 percent), Warwick (79.3 percent), Pawtucket (78.6 percent), Central Falls (74.0 percent), and Woonsocket (72.7 percent).

Source: RIDE, Data Portal

Figure 27
SAT Math Proficiency Rate by District, 2020-2021

Note: New Shoreham data were not released because the reporting size did not meet the minimum necessary to ensure confidentiality (50 students). Data for Central Falls, were not made available because fewer than 9.0 percent of students demonstrated proficiency. The following districts had participation rates lower than 85.0 percent, under which threshold RIDE has noted that "results may have been different if more students had taken the test": North Providence (84.8 percent), Burrillville (83.2 percent), North Kingstown (83.0 percent), Portsmouth (82.3 percent), West Warwick (81.8 percent), East Providence (81.0 percent), Warwick (79.3 percent), Providence (76.6 percent), Pawtucket (78.6 percent), Central Falls (74.0 percent), and Woonsocket (72.7 percent).

Source: RIDE, Data Portal
Student Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic student absenteeism is defined by the State of Rhode Island as a student enrolled for at least 90 consecutive days missing ten percent or more of the school year. Rates of chronic absenteeism demonstrate both the devastating effects of COVID-19 on student outcomes and the wide disparity across school districts and student subgroups. Rates of chronic absenteeism also help to explain the sharp drop in proficiency rates on the RICAS and SAT.

Student Chronic Absenteeism Over Time and the Effect of COVID-19

As shown in Figure 28, rates of chronic absenteeism were relatively consistent in Rhode Island prior to the pandemic. However, nationally, rates of student absenteeism grew significantly during the pandemic, and in Rhode Island, the rate increased by nearly 50 percent between the 2019-2020 and 2020-21 school years, exceeding over a quarter of all students (27.6 percent).

![Figure 28: Rates of Rhode Island Student Chronic Absenteeism, 2011-12 - 2020-21](image)

Source: RIDE, Frequently Requested Education Data; Absenteeism by State, district and schools

Student Chronic Absenteeism by Subgroup

Rates of chronic student absenteeism differed sharply based on student subgroup, with students from historically disadvantaged subgroups generally seeing greater overall rates of, and increases in, chronic absenteeism. Figure 29 shows chronic absenteeism rates from the 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 school years for white, Hispanic, and Black students and indicates that Black and Hispanic students have significantly higher rates of chronic absenteeism than do white students. It further shows that this disparity was

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195 These rates are relatively consistent with those of the nation overall; a U.S. Department of Education study found that 16.0 percent of students were absent 15 or more school days in the 2015-2016 school year. U.S. Dept. of Education, Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools. Interstate comparisons are not available because states do not track chronic absentee data that same way. Emma Dorn et. al., “COVID-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery,” McKinsey & Company, December 14, 2021.


197 Particularly during the Spring of 2020, the means used to mark attendance across Rhode Island were somewhat dubious. Across classrooms, students may have been determined to be present if they turned in work, attended a synchronous learning session, and/or marked themselves as present on a virtual sign-in sheet. It therefore seems likely that attendance was lower in...
exacerbated during the pandemic, with the rate of chronic absenteeism among white students increasing 4.5 percentage points (to 18.5 percent) while the rate for Black students increased by over 14 percentage points (to 35.7 percent) and the rate for Hispanic students increased by 13 percentage points (to 42.1 percent).

As shown in Figure 30, FRPL-eligible students and multilingual students not only had higher rates of chronic absenteeism before the pandemic but saw far higher chronic absenteeism increases than their peers. Chronic absenteeism increased by over 16 percentage points for multilingual learners, compared to a 7.4 percentage point increase among non-multilingual learners, and the increase among FRPL-eligible students was well over twice the rate of non-FRPL eligible students. Relative to nons differently abled students, differently abled students, had higher rates of chronic absenteeism before the pandemic but experienced slightly smaller increases in chronic absenteeism between 2018-2019 and 2020-2021.

Figure 30
Rhode Island Student Chronic Absenteeism by Subgroup
2018-19 - 2020-21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>2018-19 (%)</th>
<th>2019 (%)</th>
<th>2020 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non Differently Abled</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differently Abled</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Multilingual Learners</td>
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<td>18.1%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual Learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RIDE, Frequently Requested Education Data; Absenteeism by State, district and schools.

Student Chronic Absenteeism Across Districts

As shown in Figures 31 and 32, rates of chronic absenteeism varied widely across districts both prior to, and during, the pandemic, with the greatest rates of chronic absenteeism in the state’s urban core districts. In 2018-2019, fewer than one-in-ten students in 15 districts were chronically absent while at

least one-in-five students were chronically absent in Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Newport, and over one-third of students were chronically absent in Woonsocket and Providence. Rates of change in levels of chronic absenteeism between 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 varied significantly across districts, but generally remained most acute in the state’s urban core. In 2020-2021, fewer than one-in-ten students were chronically absent in 12 districts while more than one-in-five were chronically absent in 15 districts. In four districts—Newport, Woonsocket, Middletown, and Providence—more than one-in-three students were chronically absent, and more than half of Providence students were chronically absent.
Graduation Rates

Graduation Rates Regionally and Nationally

The difference in four-year graduation rates across New England states is not particularly wide, but it is nevertheless noteworthy that in the 2018-2019 school year—the year for which the most recent data are available—Rhode Island had the lowest graduation rate in the region (83.9 percent).\(^{198}\) The Ocean State moreover had a lower four-year graduation rate than the nation overall (85.8 percent) and ranked in the bottom half of states (35\(^{th}\) highest).\(^{199}\)

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\(^{198}\) Connecticut had the highest four-year graduation rate in the region (88.5 percent). National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data: America’s Public Schools, Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation by race/ethnicity and selected demographic characteristics for the United States, the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico: School Year 2018-2019.

\(^{199}\) The four-year graduation rate is the percentage of public high school students of a given class who graduate in four years with a regular diploma. Ibid.
Graduation Rates Over Time

Rhode Island has seen substantial improvement in its graduation rate in recent years. As shown in Figure 33, Rhode Island’s four-year graduation rate increased by over six percentage points between 2009 and 2021. While the pandemic seems to have wiped out longstanding gains in other student outcome indicators, there is no evidence thus far that graduation rates have been affected. Rhode Island’s experience follows national trends in this regard; one recent analysis found that this metric has been least affected by the pandemic so far, at least in part due to a temporary relaxation of graduation standards.

![Figure 33](image)

Source: RIDE, Frequently Requested Education Data, Cohort Graduation Rates

Graduation Rate by Subgroup

Graduation rates differ substantially by student subgroup in Rhode Island. As depicted in Figure 34, the four-year graduation rate in Rhode Island was significantly higher for white students than for Black or Hispanic students in the 2020-2021 school year. Rhode Island has historically had a relatively large difference between the graduation rate of white and Hispanic students, posting the 12th highest difference in this metric among U.S. states in 2018-2019. The gap between Black and white Rhode Island students was somewhat less compared to other states (ranked 40th).

As depicted in Figure 35, arguably even more disconcerting is that multilingual learners and economically disadvantaged students had a graduation rate that was 16 percentage points

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201 The study found a slight increase in graduation rates for students in 2020 and for 2021, when the rate returned to its pre-pandemic level. States relaxed their standards in a few ways, including relaxing credit, attendance, and high stakes testing requirements. Douglas N. Harris and Feng Chen, “How has the pandemic affected high school graduation and college entry,” *Brookings Institute*, May 10, 2022.

202 Black students graduated at a rate that was 7.2 percentage points lower than white students, compared to a 9.8 percentage point difference in the U.S. Ibid.
below that of their peers in 2021, while differently abled students experienced an even larger gap of 22.7 percentage points. Compared to other states, Rhode Island has historically seen a larger gap between the graduation rate of both its students with disabilities and its economically disadvantaged students and the total graduation rate.\textsuperscript{203}

![Figure 35: Rhode Island Four-Year Graduation Rate by Subgroup, 2021](image)

**Graduation Rates by District**

Detailed in Figure 36, the four-year graduation rate among districts in 2021 ranged from 64.4 percent in Woonsocket to 95.0 percent or greater in three districts. The four districts with the lowest graduation rates in the state were Woonsocket, Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence, which generally rank poorly across student outcome indicators.

\textsuperscript{203}In 2018-2019, Rhode Island ranked 16\textsuperscript{th} highest among states in the difference between the graduation rate of students with special needs and the total, and 17\textsuperscript{th} highest in the difference between the graduation rate of economically disadvantaged students and the total but posted somewhat better comparative rates for limited English proficient students; the gap between this subgroup and the total was 32\textsuperscript{nd} highest among the states. National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data: America’s Public Schools, \textit{Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation by race/ethnicity and selected demographic characteristics for the United States, the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico: School Year 2018-2019}. 
Figure 36
Rhode Island Four-Year Graduation Rate by District, 2021

Woonsocket: 64.4%
Central Falls: 65.1%
Pawtucket: 72.2%
Providence: 77.6%
Middletown: 80.1%
Warwick: 80.9%
Newport: 82.3%
Cranston: 83.4%
West Warwick: 84.4%
East Providence: 85.1%
North Smithfield: 86.0%
Coventry: 86.2%
Charlestown: 86.6%
Johnston: 89.2%
North Kingstown: 89.4%
Cumberland: 89.4%
Exeter-West Greenwich: 89.6%
Bristol Warren: 89.6%
North Providence: 90.2%
Lincoln: 90.3%
Tiverton: 90.7%
Burriillville: 91.2%
Westerly: 91.4%
South Kingstown: 91.6%
Narragansett: 92.5%
Scituate: 93.1%
Foster-Glocester: 93.3%
East Greenwich: 93.7%
Smithfield: 94.0%
Portsmouth: 95.0%
Barrington: 97.5%
New Shoreham: 83.7% (RI Total: 100.0%)

Source: RIDE, Frequently Requested Education Data, Cohort Graduation Rates
V. RIPEC Comments

Rhode Island’s K-12 system is in crisis. In 2019, student proficiency rates in Rhode Island were on par with the nation despite relatively high per pupil expenditures and lagged the New England region. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, student proficiency rates in Rhode Island have dropped sharply. On the most recent administration of the RICAS, about two-thirds of students in grades three through eight could not demonstrate proficiency on the ELA portion of the exam and—even more troubling—four-fifths could not demonstrate proficiency in math. While proficiency rates on the most recent SAT were not quite as dim, more than half of high school students were unable to demonstrate proficiency in ELA and about three-quarters of students could not do so in math. For both exams, it is likely that proficiency rates were even lower than reported due to sharp decreases in participation rates, particularly for historically disadvantaged subgroups. Recent trends in both teacher and student absenteeism are also alarming—Rhode Island has historically had high teacher absenteeism relative to the nation, and in 2020-2021, over a quarter of all students were chronically absent. While graduation rates appear unaffected by the pandemic thus far, researchers have noted that this is likely due to changes in graduation policy rather than consistency in student achievement.

While Rhode Island’s overall student proficiency rates and absenteeism levels are unacceptably low, the achievement gap for historically disadvantaged subgroups in every metric of student outcomes—an existing problem that was only exacerbated during the pandemic—is most troubling. Rhode Island is hardly unique in that its students of color, students with special needs, LEP students, and economically disadvantaged students face substantial achievement gaps, but for some metrics the gap is notably wider in Rhode Island than in the nation generally. On the 2019 NAEP, Rhode Island posted the nation’s third highest white/Hispanic proficiency gap for eighth grade reading and proficiency rates for Rhode Island’s LEP students were significantly lower than rates for these students in the U.S. overall. Regarding graduation rates, the gap between Rhode Island’s special education students, economically disadvantaged students, and Hispanic students and their peers was greater than that seen in most states.

Rhode Island’s achievement gaps are a special cause for concern in part because nonwhite students, LEP students, and economically disadvantaged students comprise a larger component of Rhode Island’s total student body than in the New England region generally. Additionally, the number of nonwhite students—particularly Hispanic students—and LEP students in Rhode Island has grown dramatically in recent years; the percentage of Rhode Island students who are Hispanic nearly doubled (from 14.8 percent to 28.6 percent) in the past two decades and from 2016 to 2021 alone, the number of LEP students in Rhode Island grew by 43.6 percent, now totaling more than one-in-ten students. Notably, the demographic composition of Rhode Island’s teaching staff is now dramatically different than that of its student body—a factor shown to negatively affect student outcomes; as of 2017-2018, Rhode Island had the nation’s ninth highest discrepancy between non-white teachers and students. Additionally, while there have been some efforts to accommodate the rapid increase in LEP students—most notably with efforts by the state to increase LEP certification among teachers in the Providence schools—there is a significant mismatch between the needs of this growing contingent of Rhode Island students and the training of the teachers who support them.
In large part linked to the achievement gap between subgroups in Rhode Island, there are also troubling achievement gaps among public school districts. Indeed, along several lines, Rhode Island districts hardly resemble one another. There is a stark concentration of the state’s nonwhite, LEP, and economically disadvantaged students in the core urban school districts. Over half—53.2 percent—of all LEP students in the state are enrolled in Providence or Central Falls school districts, and more than half of the state’s FRPL-eligible students are enrolled in just five districts: Providence, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Pawtucket, and Newport. White students make up fewer than half of the student body in six school districts, including Providence, where only 7.9 percent of students are white. In sharp contrast, white students comprise at least four-in-five students in 20 districts.

With student demographics remarkably dissimilar to the remainder of the state, Rhode Island’s urban core districts have student outcomes that are very low across several indicators. For instance, on the 2020-2021 RICAS, fewer than one-in-five students in Providence, Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Newport, and West Warwick, and fewer than one-in-ten students in Central Falls demonstrated ELA proficiency, compared to over half of students in 13 districts. On the math portion of the RICAS, fewer than one-in-ten students demonstrated proficiency in Providence, Pawtucket, and Newport, and in Central Falls, West Warwick, and Woonsocket, the actual proficiency rate was not made publicly available because fewer than one-in-twenty students demonstrated proficiency. In contrast, over 40 percent of students demonstrated proficiency in seven school districts. Levels of chronic absenteeism were also especially high in the state’s urban core in 2020-2021, particularly in Providence, where over half of all students were chronically absent.

Additionally challenging is that the system of governance for Rhode Island’s K-12 schools is fragmented, without clear lines of responsibility or accountability. The General Assembly has ultimate authority over elementary and secondary education but has delegated this authority to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education and to a Commissioner and Department of Education answerable to the Council. However, the statutory powers of the Council and RIDE are relatively limited, and while the governor appoints members to the Council, subject to advice and consent of the Senate, Council members serve for three-year terms, thereby limiting the power of a new governor to influence the Council’s policies. Given this relatively weak state authority, power over public schools falls to local school committees, which have no power to raise revenues and are thereby dependent on their respective municipalities, and on state government, for the financial resources to operate schools. The result is a system where each authority is dependent on other parts of the system to carry out their responsibilities and no authority has ultimate accountability for system outcomes.

Despite the troubling outcomes and many challenges illuminated above, there has been a relative failure to advance a wide-reaching, consistent reform agenda in recent years. Since the 1980s, Rhode Island’s system of public education has experienced several periods of reform, and some notable, positive changes have come of these efforts—Rhode Island now has a system in place to collect, disaggregate, and make public essential data, including school- and district-level assessment data. The state has not found it easy to stick to one assessment, and it also has not maintained consistency in academic standards, but that there are standards at all—and that there has been significant movement to align those standards with assessment, curriculum, and instruction—represents progress. While arguably insufficient in totality, there has been important work done to improve the quality and effectiveness of educators in Rhode
Island, including higher standards for teacher preparation programs and the tying of professional
development to recertification. The establishment of a state education funding formula in 2010 did not
solve the issue of inequitable funding between districts, but did increase the state share of education
funding, particularly for low-income districts. Further, the Charter Public School Act of 1995 paved the
way for the significant growth of charter public schools, which have proven successful in offering a sizable
contingent of public school students, a majority of whom are economically disadvantaged, with the
opportunity to attend a school with student outcomes often significantly more favorable than their home
district schools.

Yet, the history of education reform in Rhode Island too often has been marked by large investments of
time or money in programs or initiatives for which there was insufficient support, or by some programs
that were apparently effective (such as the beginning teacher induction program or Professional
Development Investment Fund) were not supported with long-term financial support. In recent years,
there has been little political will to pursue substantial reforms to improve Rhode Island’s K-12 schools. A
small burst of effort in 2019 resulted in a requirement that standards be aligned with high-quality
curriculum but little else, as the Assembly’s attempt to establish school-based management does not
seem to have resulted in any actual shift in local governance structures. Since 2019, the immediate
urgency needed to respond to the pandemic has taken attention away from broad-based reform and little
in the way of concrete, holistic reform policy has been brought forward since.

Given these findings, RIPEC offers to policymakers the following considerations:

**Education reform should be pursued by all stakeholders with the level of priority and urgency
commensurate with the current crisis.** Rhode Island’s education system has long had issues of
unacceptably low student outcomes overall and deeply inequitable outcomes for students across lines of
demography and zip code. These serious deficiencies have only been exacerbated during the pandemic.
While Rhode Island historically has had periods of productive reform activity, often connected with federal
initiatives, recent years have seen a relative lack of energy put into improving our K-12 system. For reforms
to be successful, this energy and focus needs to come from a broad range of stakeholders—not only
policymakers and education leaders, but also teachers, parents, academics, and business and community
leaders. At the same time, policymakers should resist continuing to impose piecemeal mandates and
requirements on school districts and teachers that have no meaningful effect on student outcomes and
divert time and resources away from improving academic achievement.

**The state’s school funding formula should be reformed to increase the state share of overall education
funding and target more state aid to support disadvantaged communities.** While the state’s funding
formula, now ten years old, has been successful in increasing the state’s share of education revenues and
in targeting this increased aid to poorer districts, some of Rhode Island’s poorest districts—both in terms
of relative property wealth and the proportion of students from low-income families—still have among
the lowest per pupil expenditures in the state. These disparities are compounded given the greater per
pupil cost of educating disadvantaged students and those with limited English proficiency. The excess
formula funding appropriated in the current fiscal year ($68.3 million) to hold districts harmless from

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204 RIPEC, “Rhode Island’s Funding Formula After Ten Years: Education Finance in the Ocean State,” April 2022.
enrollment declines connected with the pandemic presents an excellent opportunity to reprogram funding to reform the formula.\textsuperscript{205}

**Policymakers should reform the governance of Rhode Island’s K-12 system to streamline authorities, clarify responsibilities, and improve accountability.** Effective education reform will require a stronger state role. Accordingly, policymakers should seek to strengthen authority at the state level and consider making the Commissioner of Education an appointee of the governor like other cabinet members.\textsuperscript{206} Similarly, as the state has become a larger source of school funding in the last decade, state policymakers should take a more active role in overseeing and ensuring efficiency in spending by local school districts. It is promising that the General Assembly recently has recognized the need to focus on governance in creating a joint legislative commission to study and make recommendations for the effective administration of K-16 public education governance.

**More time and resources need to be invested in teacher professional development that is content-centered and teacher-driven, particularly for math instruction.** After student background, there is no greater indicator of student success than teacher quality. While it is positive that professional development is tied to teacher recertification in Rhode Island, there are no guardrails in place to ensure quality and consistency, and national survey data suggests that Rhode Island teachers are less likely than teachers nationwide to agree that their professional development will help improve student outcomes.\textsuperscript{207} Moreover, whereas the state distributed significant funds for professional development between FY 1998 and FY 2009, there has been no consistent, dedicated fund for professional development since. At the state level, there should be a commitment to funding effective professional development programs that improve the practices of educators and outcomes for students. Given that many LEAs are in the process of selecting and implementing new math and ELA curriculum in Rhode Island, it is arguably an ideal time to not only fund professional development, but to adjust state requirements to ensure it is intentionally focused on discipline-specific curriculum development that supports collaboration and active learning. Notably, content- and teacher-driven professional development that is of an adequate duration have been shown to be effective.\textsuperscript{208} Given the exceptionally low levels of student proficiency in math throughout our K-12 system, particular focus should be given to funding, developing, and mandating a high-quality, consistent, teacher-driven professional development program for math instruction.

**More needs to be done to recruit, retain, and support new teachers, particularly teachers in high-need areas and teachers of color.** Rhode Island long has suffered from a lack of certified educators in certain subjects, such as math and science, and has struggled to increase the number of teachers of color. More recently, there has been a sharp decline in the overall number of teachers educated and certified to teach in our state. While many efforts are underway to address these issues, most notably in Providence, more robust and comprehensive initiatives are needed to make a sustainable difference across the system.

\textsuperscript{205} RIPEC, “Rhode Island’s FY 2023 Enacted Budget and Fiscal Outlook,” September 2022.

\textsuperscript{206} A 2020 bill introduced in the Rhode Island State Senate proposed that the governor, rather than the Council on Elementary and Elementary and Secondary Education, would appoint the Commissioner of Education, subject to advice and consent of the Senate. R.I. Senate Bill, 2020-S 2173.

\textsuperscript{207} In a 2017-2018 nationwide survey, 74.6 percent of Rhode Island teachers “agreed that the techniques they learned about in professional development will help improve student outcomes,” compared to 83.9 percent of teachers nationwide. National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2017-2018.

Since salaries for new teachers are very low in relation to veteran teachers and to the state’s average wage, policymakers also may wish to consider adjustments to beginning teacher compensation—either through salary, bonuses, or loan forgiveness. The relatively low compensation for new teachers in particular stands in the way of attracting teachers in high-need areas—particularly math and science—and teachers of color.209 New teachers also are particularly in need of professional support, both to increase retention at a time when the number of teachers certified annually has been declining and to enhance the quality of their instruction. To that end, policymakers should consider reinstating the state’s beginning teacher induction program to support new teachers, as such programs have been shown to positively affect both teacher retention and student outcomes.210 At the same time, policymakers should guard against the lowering of standards for educators and educator preparation programs as evidence suggests that teacher diversity and teacher quality are both critical factors for student outcomes and that diversity and selectivity are not incompatible policy objectives.211

Resources should be directed towards ELL certification for existing teachers, teacher preparation programs should be required to provide training in teaching LEP students, and the state funding formula should be revised to include dedicated funding for LEP students. Rhode Island has experienced an astounding increase in the number of LEP students in recent years, and the system has had difficulty catching up, with math and reading proficiency rates for LEP students in Rhode Island lower than LEP students nationally. Promising work has been done in PPSD to increase the number of ELL-certified teachers, but policymakers should prioritize expanding these efforts and to bring them to other districts, particularly those that—like Providence—have large concentrations of LEP students. To better prepare the emergent workforce for instructing LEP students, state policymakers should additionally consider adding to existing credentialing requirements for teacher preparation programs a requirement that this training include the skills to effectively address the academic needs of students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds.212 To further support the classroom needs of LEP students, an additional per pupil funding bonus for LEP students should be integrated into the state funding formula in a similar manner to the existing bonus for economically disadvantaged students. Policymakers could reprogram existing ELL categorical funding to partially offset the cost of this reform.213

Policymakers should make room for innovation and choice so that school districts and educators can address the great disparity of student backgrounds and needs presented across Rhode Island’s K-12 system. School districts across Rhode Island pursue teaching and learning under very similar structures

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209 Potential teachers of color are more likely than potential white teachers to bear as individuals the cost of college and greater student loan debt, thereby making them less likely to choose a lower-paying profession. Additionally, given the interest of industries in diversifying their workforce, high-quality candidates of color are arguably more likely to be recruited by other industries. Lisette Partelow, et al., “America Needs More Teachers of Color and a More Selective Teaching Profession,” Center for American Progress, September 14, 2017.


212 California’s Commission of Teacher Credentialing includes language to this effect, stipulating that “all teachers know how to address the academic needs of all students from a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.” Jennifer F. Samson and Brian A. Collins, “Preparing All Teachers to Meet the Needs of English Language Learners: Applying Research to Policy and Practice for Teacher Effectiveness,” Center for American Progress, April 2012.

213 In the FY 2023 budget as enacted, $5.0 million was allocated to categorical funding for English language learners. R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, FY 2023 Budget as Enacted, Section VI: Special Reports.
despite the dramatic differences among districts in demographic makeup and student needs. Charter public schools—which have generally been successful in Rhode Island at tailoring learning to meet student needs and enhance student outcomes—should be supported and expanded. Although charter schools have greater flexibility than traditional public schools to experiment with and adopt alternative methods of teaching and learning, innovations such as student-centered learning have shown promise in traditional school districts as well. 

Policymakers should support and promote innovative practices by schools and districts that align with the needs and backgrounds of students.

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About the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council

The Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) is a nonpartisan and nonprofit public policy research organization dedicated to advancing fiscally responsible government, competitive tax policies, and economic opportunities for all in Rhode Island.