



RIPEC

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

Executive Summary October 2022

Rhode Island's K-12 education system is in crisis. Student outcomes are unacceptably low, there are stark achievement gaps across demographic and geographic lines, and the pandemic has further disrupted the system. In response, RIPEC undertook an in-depth historical and analytical study of the system and based upon its findings, developed targeted recommendations for policymakers.

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% or \$995.5 million) of state general revenues and over half (52.7% or \$1.46 billion) of local revenues in Rhode Island. 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.

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 FY 2020. However, based on several 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. There are serious and stark gaps across lines of geography, race and ethnicity, and other demographic features including poverty, disability status, and English language proficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related closure of schools only exacerbated these issues, causing sharp declines in student outcomes overall, with particularly detrimental effects for students belonging to historically disadvantaged subgroups. The pandemic also seemingly brought to a standstill any attempts to enact systemwide education reform.

As a result, Rhode Island's K-12 system is in crisis. On the most recent administration of the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS), about two-thirds of students in grades three through eight could not demonstrate proficiency on the English Language Arts (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, proficiency rates were likely even lower than reported due to sharp declines 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 (27.6%) of all students were chronically absent.

While Rhode Island's overall student proficiency rates and absenteeism levels are unacceptably low, the achievement gap for historically disadvantaged subgroups is most troubling. Rhode Island is hardly unique in that its students of color, students with special needs, limited English proficient (LEP) students, and economically disadvantaged students face substantial achievement gaps, but in 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 as compared to students not from these subgroups 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% to 28.6%) between 2001 and 2021 and from 2016 to 2021 alone, the number of LEP students in Rhode Island grew by 43.6%, with this subgroup now comprising more than one-in-ten students (11.3%). 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.

There is a stark concentration of the state's nonwhite, LEP, and economically disadvantaged students in Rhode Island's core urban school districts. Over half—53.2%—of all LEP students in the state are enrolled in Providence or Central Falls, and more than half of the state's free or reduced-priced lunch-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, at least four-in-five students are white 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. 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. On the math RICAS, fewer than one-in-ten students demonstrated proficiency in Providence, Woonsocket, and Newport. In Central Falls, West Warwick, and Woonsocket, fewer than one-in-twenty students demonstrated proficiency. Levels of chronic absenteeism were also especially high in the state's urban core in 2020-2021, particularly in Providence, where over half (55.1%) 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. Rhode Island's General Assembly has ultimate authority over elementary and secondary education but has delegated this authority to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. However, the statutory powers of the Council and RIDE are relatively limited, and while the governor appoints members to the Council, members serve for three-year terms, thereby limiting the power of a new governor to influence policy. Given this relatively weak state authority, power over public

schools falls to 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 challenges illuminated above, there has been a relative failure to advance a reform agenda in recent years. Since the 1980s, Rhode Island's system of public education has experienced some notable, positive changes, including the development of a system to collect, disaggregate, and make public essential data. The development of statewide academic standards—and the movement to align assessment, curriculum, and instruction to those standards—also represents progress. Important work has been done to improve the effectiveness of educators, including 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 among districts, but did increase the state share of education funding, particularly for low-income districts. Further, the 1995 Charter Public School Act paved the way for the significant growth of charter public schools, which have proven successful in offering a sizable contingent of students, a majority of whom are economically disadvantaged, with the opportunity to attend a school with greater student outcomes 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), but which lacked 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, there have been a few noteworthy developments, but these were not related to a broader movement to enact systemwide reform.

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. 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 their 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 enrollment declines connected with the pandemic presents an excellent opportunity to reprogram funding to reform the formula.

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. 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. 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, 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. 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. 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. New teachers also are especially 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. 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.

Resources should be directed towards English Language Learner (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 Providence to increase the number of ELL-certified teachers, but policymakers should prioritize expanding these efforts and bringing 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, 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. 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 manner similar to the existing bonus for economically disadvantaged students. Policymakers could reprogram existing ELL categorical funding to partially offset the cost of this reform.

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 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.

This RIPEC 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](#).