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RIPEC Policy Brief

Rhode Island's Multilingual Learners: Funding Challenges for a Rapidly Growing K-12 Student Population

Executive Summary October 2023

In this policy brief, RIPEC analyzes the funding picture for multilingual learners in Rhode Island, highlighting a large growth in multilingual learner enrollment in recent years, the high concentration of these students in a few districts, the relatively poor outcomes for these students, and the funding directed towards multilingual learners relative to other states.

State education aid in Rhode Island has special importance in providing adequate and equitable funding, with the state's urban core communities relying heavily on state funding due to low levels of property wealth and high concentrations of economically disadvantaged and multilingual students.

One of the state's most pressing K-12 education issues is funding for multilingual learners, who represent a rapidly growing student population in Rhode Island. From 2015 to 2023, the number of multilingual learners in district schools increased from 9,372 to 15,260 students (62.8 percent). This student group now makes up 12.5 percent of all students, up from 7.2 percent in 2015. Rhode Island's population of multilingual learners is heavily concentrated in a few districts. Over 90.0 percent of all multilingual learners in the state attend schools in only ten districts, with Providence schools alone accounting for roughly half (50.6 percent) of all the state's multilingual learners. In 2023, Central Falls became Rhode Island's first district with more than half of its students classified as multilingual learners.

Rhode Island had no separate state funding for multilingual learners until fiscal year (FY) 2017. From FY 2017 until FY 2023, categorical funding for high-cost multilingual learners was based on ten percent of the state share of the per pupil core instructional amount but was also subject to appropriation. For the FY 2024 budget, the Assembly made two major changes to funding multilingual learners: it increased the formula factor to 15.0 percent of the per pupil core instructional amount and made the funding no longer subject to appropriation. These changes resulted in a large increase in categorical funding, with \$16.8 million allocated to districts in FY 2024 (\$1,169 per pupil), up from \$4.5 million (\$307 per pupil) in FY 2023.

Despite this large increase in funding, Rhode Island still ranks well behind most other states in the country that provide funding for multilingual learners. Among the 31 states and Washington D.C. that use a percentage of the per pupil instruction cost for funding, Rhode Island ranks 28th (fifth lowest), and the state's 15.0 percent factor is well behind the mean of 41.0 percent. Rhode Island's factor weight is also well behind neighboring Connecticut and Massachusetts; Connecticut has a

factor weight of 25.0 percent, and Massachusetts provides a share of a flat amount based on grade level that are equivalent to a factor of 29.3 percent, 32.6 percent, and 32.7 percent of the state's core instructional amount.

Student outcomes for multilingual learners are a major concern. National Assessment of Educational Progress data on multilingual learners is limited, but Rhode Island's fourth and eighth grade multilingual learners trail the nation in math proficiency, while non-multilingual learners are roughly on par with their peers nationally. There are also wide achievement gaps among Rhode Island districts. Some of the districts with the state's worst outcomes for multilingual learners also have the highest numbers of these students, relatively limited economic resources, and spend among the lowest amounts per multilingual learner.

Based on this analysis, RIPEC offers the following recommendations:

The factor for multilingual learners should be raised. To get closer to the national average and more in-line with its neighbors Connecticut and Massachusetts, Rhode Island should raise the factor for multilingual learners from 15.0 percent to at least 25.0 percent. Raising the factor to 25.0 percent would provide an additional \$11.8 million to districts in FY 2025. Those that would benefit the most from this funding have the most multilingual learners, the most students in poverty, and have the worst learning outcomes for multilingual learners.

Funding for multilingual learners should be incorporated into the formula. Additional funding for multilingual learners should be allocated as discretionary funding rather than through categorical funds allocated on a reimbursement basis. Multilingual learners benefit not only from specialized services that qualify for funding under RIDE's grant reimbursement process, but they also gain when the general educational environment is strong for all students.

Funding for multilingual learners should be based on the most recent student data. If the growth of multilingual learners continues at the current pace (6.0 percent increase from FY 2023), there will continue to be a lag in funding until the most recent student counts are incorporated into funding.

Data collection and reporting should be improved. There is a lack of reliable data as to spending by districts on programs for multilingual learners. Improving equity in funding requires, at a minimum, that districts provide timely and accurate reporting of expenditures on multilingual learner programs.

The Rhode Island General Assembly should conduct a comprehensive review of the funding formula for education. State funding for multilingual learners should be included in a larger conversation about education spending in the Ocean State. The state education funding formula has been affected by a patchwork of multiple, complicated changes adopted over several years that resulted in inequitable funding allocations, where the wealthiest districts received the largest per-pupil percentage increases. The formula has not operated as intended for the last three fiscal years and needs reform.