RIPEC

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March 10, 2026

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara
Chairperson, House Committee on Education
Room 135
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Testimony on House Bill 7415 – Relating to Education – Establishment of Charter Public Schools

Chair McNamara,

I am writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) in opposition to House Bill 7415 – Relating to Education – Establishment of Charter Public Schools. This bill would prohibit the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education from granting preliminary or final approval for the creation or expansion of charter schools for the 2026–2027, 2027–2028, and 2028–2029 school years. It would also prohibit the state from approving or appropriating funding for any new or expanding charter school during this period and reduce the statutory cap on charter schools from 35 to 25—the number of charters that have currently been granted. Because the funding prohibition would apply retroactively, the bill would effectively nullify the Council's recent approval of a new charter school, De La Comunidad Bilingual School, and prevent The Greene School from expanding to serve middle school students.

Action by the legislature to impose a moratorium on charter expansion and reverse the approval granted by the Council after informed consideration is not in the best interest of students, their families, their communities, or the state at large. Rhode Island public schools, on whole, are not producing the best outcomes for students—the most recent Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) results from 2024–25 show that only 34 percent of students in 3rd through 8th grade statewide were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), and 31 percent were proficient in math. Outcomes were even lower in urban core districts, which posted proficiency rates below 20 percent in ELA and math and, in the case of Central Falls and Woonsocket, below

ten percent.[1] Compared to other states, Rhode Island has posted middling results, despite having among the highest spending levels on K-12 education in the nation.[2]

Against this backdrop, charter public schools are a bright spot in Rhode Island's K-12 system. A 2023 study from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that Rhode Island charter schools produce measurable improvements in student outcomes, with charter school students having the equivalent of 90 days of extra instruction in reading compared to traditional public schools and 88 extra days in math—approximately half a school year. The study, which analyzed student outcomes in 29 states, Washington D.C., and New York City, found that Rhode Island charter school students achieved stronger results than their traditional public school peers than anywhere else.[3]

Similarly, RIPEC's research has shown that charter schools overall are producing better student outcomes than traditional public schools. RIPEC found in a comprehensive 2021 report on Rhode Island's charter schools, that charters overall outperformed district schools on the RICAS in ELA and math, despite predominately serving students from historically disadvantaged communities. It also found that the state's two largest charter public schools, Blackstone Valley Prep and Achievement First, outperformed their sending districts on the RICAS by more than twenty percentage points in both ELA and math.[4]

More recently, in a February 2026 report, RIPEC found that charter schools overall are doing a markedly better job at reducing chronic absenteeism than traditional public schools. Using a linear regression model, RIPEC compared each local education agency's actual chronic absenteeism rate with a predicted rate based on student demographics and found that, compared to districts, a greater share of charter schools outperformed predicted levels. In total, eight charter schools had chronic absenteeism rates more than five percentage points below predictions, with three exceeding ten points below, and two exceeding twenty points. Notably, The Greene School—one of the charter schools that would be negatively impacted by the proposed retroactive moratorium—outperformed demographic-based predictions more than any other LEA, posting a rate that was 24.8 percentage points below predicted levels. In comparison, the best-performing district relative to predicted levels, Central Falls, posted a rate 10.1 percentage points below predicted levels, and no other district posted a rate more than five percentage points below.[5]

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[1] R.I. Dept. of Education, Assessment Data Portal.

[2] The Nation's Report Card, State Profiles, Rhode Island. Of the 50 states, Rhode Island ranked 8th highest in per pupil elementary and secondary school revenue in FY 2023, the most recent year for which data are available. State revenues per pupil of $21,182 were $4,656 greater than the U.S. total of $16,526. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 Annual Survey of School System Finances. Rhode Island ranked even higher in K-12 spending in terms of state residents' ability to pay; on a personal income basis, Rhode Island spending on K-12 ranked sixth highest nationwide in FY 2023. RIPEC, How Rhode Island Compares: State & Local Taxing & Spending, October, 2025.

[3] Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), "As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III, 2023," June 2023.

[4] RIPEC, "An Analysis of Charter Public Schools in Rhode Island," June 2021.

[5] RIPEC, "Chronic Absenteeism in Rhode Island," February 2026.

The success of charter public schools is particularly important because they predominately serve students from the state's lowest performing districts and therefore offer students from these communities access to a better education. Last year, more than four in five charter school students (83 percent) resided in Central Falls, Providence, Pawtucket, or Woonsocket.[6] In those districts, 55 percent of open enrollment middle school seats are in a one-star school (the lowest designation on the state's five-star ESSA accountability framework) and 88 percent of open enrollment high school seats are in one-star schools. In comparison, 48 percent of charter school seats are in schools receiving three or more stars.[7]

As a result, family demand for a charter school education continues to far outpace the number of available seats. Last year, there were 9,372 unique applicants for 3,170 seats, meaning that two in every three students who applied for a charter school seat were unable to attend a charter school.[8] By reversing the expansion of charter seats, the proposed legislation would make it even more difficult for Rhode Island families to pursue the educational opportunities they determine are best for their children.

The bill is also problematic in that it would retroactively remove approval that was already granted after a deliberate process founded on comprehensive evaluations and objective, standardized, and data-driven criteria. Charters are required by statute and Council regulations to submit detailed applications that include evidence of community need and support. Community members had the ability to make themselves heard through a 60-day public comment period and public hearings. Prior to granting approval, the Council moreover conducted independent local impact analyses, consistent with the statutory requirement to "ensure that the [charter's] proposal is economically prudent for the city or town and academically prudent for the proposed sending school districts and for all students in the sending districts."[9] This rigorous process reflects a charter evaluation framework that CREDO recently identified as a key factor in the overall strength of Rhode Island's charter sector.[10]

There is no question that much work remains to ensure every child in Rhode Island has access to a high-quality education. However, this bill will not advance that goal; rather, it would restrict access to proven, high-performing schools for students who could benefit most.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to reject House Bill 7415.

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[6] R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, FY 2026 Budget as Enacted – Education Aid Report; RIPEC calculations.
[7] R.I. Dept. of Education, Annual Update: Charter Schools, November 18, 2025.
[8] Ibid.
[9] R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-77.4-3.
[10] Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), "The Impact of Rhode Island's Charter School Performance Review System on the Education Landscape," October 2025.

Sincerely,

Michael DiBiase
President & CEO
Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council

RIPEC is a nonpartisan and nonprofit public policy research organization dedicated to providing objective research and analysis that addresses the critical challenges surrounding public finance and economic opportunity in Rhode Island.