

Testimony in support of House Bill 7560

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In September 2024, I will have been in the field of education for a quarter of a century. I am grateful to have served PK-12 students across urban, suburban and rural communities— from Coudersport, PA to Brooklyn, NY to Westerly, RI. Throughout my career I have had the opportunity to witness extraordinary achievement and growth from young people across the socioeconomic spectrum, and have journeyed with students who have experienced significant trauma and tragic loss. This work has been a true privilege and one I do not take lightly. All of that having been said, serving in the role of school principal at Sheila “Skip” Nowell Academy has been the joy and fulfillment of my entire professional life.

At Nowell, the entire staff not only knows each student well but we know their back story, their family, their passions, their struggles, the things that motivate them, the things that trigger them... the list goes on. The small, family-like community allows for deep, meaningful and long-lasting relationships that go well-beyond graduation. It opens the door for academic, socio-emotional and personal growth that simply is not possible in a larger school environment. This growth is then connected with the remarkable resilience of our students. On a daily basis our students overcome some of the most challenging of circumstances— from teen pregnancy and parenting, to homelessness and food insecurity, from sole responsibility for family finances to speaking no English. In spite of emotional abuse, sexual assault, unaccompanied immigration, drug addiction, neglect and abandonment, many Nowell students come to school first to feel safe, seen and heard. Only then can they envision accomplishing incredible things in the face of incredible adversity. In fact, after Nowell, these amazing young people are accepted to a large number of post-secondary institutions and training programs, earning huge amounts of scholarship money. They sustain positions in a variety of workplaces with invaluable skills and knowledge. They go on to serve our country respectably in various branches of the U.S. military. They build happy and healthy families that begin to thrive. And, consistently, our alumni return to us with great satisfaction for their next steps, whatever they may be.

However, if the Rhode Island public examines our school report card, what they will see upon first look is a school that has failed: the lowest attendance rate in the state, little achievement on SAT assessments, unremarkable growth with MLL and special education populations, etc. But these data are simplistic and incomplete. Nowell is not a failure. These accountability measures are not designed to tell the complex story of the powerful work that Nowell does. Acknowledging that federal regulations require reporting these important statistics, Nowell needs the opportunity to provide more context. Context like the fact that 95% of our high school students have struggled with chronic absenteeism since kindergarten and have missed out on years of instruction in foundational skills. Context like the fact that, due to disengagement and disenfranchisement, most of Nowell students have been enrolled at two or more high schools before coming to Nowell. Context like the fact that many of Nowell students are required to take high-stakes assessments after only being in the United States for one year. The list of context continues. And **this** is where House Bill 7560 absolutely matters.

Rhode Island needs Sheila “Skip” Nowell Academy to be able to support its most vulnerable students. Rhode Island needs Sheila “Skip” Nowell Academy to help its young people become positively contributing members of its communities. Rhode Island needs Sheila “Skip” Nowell Academy to serve as a model for other schools. And Rhode Island needs to support Sheila “Skip” Nowell Academy to succeed. The way for this to happen is for you to support House Bill 7560. Once passed, just wait and see the outstanding things that will come from the students, families and staff of Nowell. We are confident that you, our elected officials, will be as elated and full of pride as we are to serve our school community. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of what we anticipate will be nothing short of life-changing legislation on behalf of the students and constituents of Rhode Island.