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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7355 An Act RELATING TO EDUCATION -- COUNCIL ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

**House Education Committee**

**March 27, 2024**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports House Bill 7355 and would like to thank Representative Speakman for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Carson, Henries, Knight, Alzate, Donovan, Morales, Caldwell, Ajello, and Tanzi for co-sponsoring. This bill would prohibit colleges and universities from withholding a student's academic transcripts solely due to the student's failure to pay any expenses owed to the institution.

College transcripts are essential for students, employers, and colleges. Students rely on transcripts to show their academic performance, employers use transcripts to verify the skills and qualifications of an applicant, and colleges utilize transcripts to assess transfer credits and determine financial assistance. Denying students access to their transcripts based on unpaid expenses creates unnecessary barriers to their educational and professional advancement. It punishes students who may have already faced financial hardships and puts at risk their ability to transfer to other colleges and universities, apply for graduate programs, or enter the workforce.

Research shows that Black and Brown students, first-generation students, and low-income students are more likely to be unable to demonstrate their college credits because of withheld transcripts. These students already face difficulties in accessing higher education and are less likely to clear their debt without obtaining a well-paying job.

The bill still permits colleges to withhold academic credits, grades, or diplomas if students have unpaid expenses. This approach aims to maintain accountability for unpaid fees while ensuring students can access their academic records. It recognizes the importance of supporting students while addressing concerns about outstanding debts.

Withholding of transcripts is already prohibited in *all* or most instances in 11 states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington. The Department of Education has issued new rules prohibiting colleges and universities from withholding student transcripts in most cases. However, House Bill 7355 aims to provide additional protection to Rhode Island students.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.