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Testimony of Superintendent Lynn Dambruch

Rhode Island House Committee on Education - Opposition to H5252 – Warwick Public Schools Budget Commission

February 6, 2025

Chairman Joseph McNamara and Members of the House Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Lynn Dambruch, and I am the Superintendent of Warwick Public Schools. I come before you to express my strong opposition to H5252, which seeks to establish a Warwick Public Schools Budget Commission to oversee the district's financial management.

Let me begin by stating clearly that my administrative team and I recognize the financial challenges facing Warwick Public Schools, and we are working diligently to address them. The projected \$9 million deficit has been a serious concern, but I want to emphasize that through careful financial management, cost-cutting measures, and collaborative planning with the Rhode Island Auditor General, we have already reduced that shortfall to \$ 5.7 million. After next week's School Committee Meeting this shortfall is predicted to approximately \$3 million. While we still have work to do, this demonstrates our commitment to financial responsibility and corrective action without the need for external oversight.

We have taken immediate and proactive steps to stabilize our financial position. My team is closely evaluating expenditures, making responsible budgetary reductions, and ensuring that any cuts have minimal impact on students and instructional programs. We are also working in full compliance with state law and in direct collaboration with the Auditor General to develop a comprehensive, long-term financial plan that ensures fiscal stability while preserving the integrity of Warwick's educational programs.

H5252 unnecessarily duplicates efforts already underway and risks disrupting the careful progress we are making. The proposed Budget Commission would add bureaucratic layers without offering additional expertise or solutions beyond what my administration, the School Committee, the City of Warwick, and the Auditor General are already addressing. The bill also removes spending authority from the School Department, potentially delaying critical operational decisions and leading to disruptions in educational services.

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Furthermore, the timing of this bill is problematic. We are already on track to present a deficit reduction plan that meets legal and financial requirements. Adding a new governing entity at this stage would cause confusion and create unnecessary conflict in an already complex process.

Warwick Public Schools has a history of resilience and strength. The financial difficulties we are experiencing are serious but not insurmountable, and we are addressing them with transparency, responsibility, and urgency. I respectfully urge the Committee to allow our local and state oversight mechanisms to continue their work rather than imposing an external commission that would only complicate our efforts.

This legislation creates a budget commission, composed of financial and/or business professionals that most likely lack the necessary understanding of the unique needs of students, staff, and educators, making it difficult to allocate resources in a way that directly supports teaching and learning. Furthermore, the budget is not an isolated element but is intricately linked to the goals outlined in the School Improvement Plans and District Strategic Plan. Most financial decisions are made to move the district forward by funding goals and RIDE mandates. Without the expertise and insight of those directly involved in education, budget decisions may overlook crucial areas like social-emotional learning and academic support, ultimately hindering the district's ability to meet its educational objectives. In addition, without understanding the nuance of each school within the district, certain needed resources may not be deployed that are necessary for the students' well-being and academic success. While the local government plays a crucial role in supporting education through funding and policy initiatives at a city or regional level, their expertise is in running the city as a whole, not in managing the complex, specialized needs of a school system. When superintendents and other certified professionals are in charge, decisions are more likely to be centered around what's best for students and teachers, leading to a more effective and responsive education system.

For these reasons, I strongly urge the Committee to reject H5252 and allow the Warwick School Department to continue implementing solutions that will restore financial stability while protecting our students, educators, and school community.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Lynn Dambruch
Superintendent
Warwick Public Schools