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Commissioner

State of Rhode Island  
DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION  
Shepard Building  
255 Westminster Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-3400

April 1, 2025

The Honorable Representative Joseph McNamara  
Chair, Rhode Island House Committee on Education  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith St.  
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: House Bill 5839 – An Act Relating Education – Council on Elementary and Secondary Education**

Chair McNamara and members of the House Education Committee:

On behalf of the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE), I write in opposition to House Bill 5839. This act would expand the Rhode Island Council on Elementary and Secondary Education to ten (10) voting members: make six (6) a quorum; and would make the State Teacher of the Year and the Chair of the Student Advisory Council voting members of the Council.

RIDE opposes this change. The current structure of the Council has worked well in the many years that it has met with eight voting members. The student member of the Council gains invaluable experience by participating in Council discussions, actively listening, and posing thoughtful questions. However, serving as a voting member would introduce additional responsibilities that may be challenging for a student already managing extensive academic and extracurricular commitments. The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education frequently deliberates on complex and sensitive matters – including litigation, personnel decisions, education regulations, collective bargaining, and budgeting priorities – requiring a level of engagement that may be difficult for a student to sustain.

Past and current members of the Student Advisory Council have shared with RIDE representatives that they often find it difficult to attend most meetings, which impacts the ability to make a quorum. Additionally, many of our past student members have said they do not agree with this legislation and do not need to vote. From a governance perspective, the most appropriate locus on student voice would live at the local level on local school committees. Additionally, there are concerns about liability and legal indemnification for minors serving in this capacity.

Similarly, the Rhode Island Teacher of the Year plays a vital role in shaping discussions on the Council. While their insights are valuable, the demands of this statewide role are significant. As a non-voting member of the Council, the Teacher of the Year contributes meaningfully without the added commitment of voting responsibilities. Making this individual a voting member would change the nature of their participation in a way that may not be sustainable, given their other obligations and commitments.

Finally, H5839 calls for the Student Advisory Council to meet quarterly at a minimum. RIDE recommends amending the language to specify “a minimum of four meetings per year,” which would provide flexibility by not requiring meetings during the summer vacation when it is more challenging to engage students and families. Currently, the Committee meets monthly from September to June, averaging at least ten meetings annually. This amendment would help maintain the Committee’s effectiveness while allowing practical scheduling considerations.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Andy Andrade

CC: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Morales