



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5839 Re: Council on Elementary and
Secondary Education
House Education Committee
April 1, 2025
Paige Parks, Executive Director**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 5839 and thank Representative Morales for sponsoring this bill and Representative Ajello, Potter, Stewart, Casimiro, Caldwell, Batista, Handy, Tanzi, and McNamara for co-sponsoring. This bill would provide the chairperson of the Student Advisory Council and the Rhode Island Teacher of the Year with voting powers on the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education.

The *Rhode Island Board of Education Act* establishes the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education that consists of eight voting members of the Board of Education, all appointed by the Governor. It also establishes a Student Advisory Council consisting of one elected high school student representative from each public secondary school in grades 9, 10, and 11. The members of the Student Advisory Council are selected through an election at each public high school in Rhode Island. A student may serve no more than three terms on the Student Advisory Council. The members of the Student Advisory Council elect a chairperson from within the Student Advisory Council to serve a one-year term as an ex officio and nonvoting member of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. The 2022-2023 Student Advisory Council was made up of 43 members representing 40 traditional, charter, and state-operated public school districts.

According to research conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, in 2022, [24 state-level boards](#) of education included student board members, and among them, 7 allowed students to vote. These states were California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, and the District of Columbia. Additionally, California now mandates that student board members receive payment for their time and the [California School Board Association](#) provides student board member training.

The **Teacher of the Year program**, established in 1952 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, was created to honor the critical role of teachers as champions of the American Dream. Each year, every state and U.S. protectorate selects one exemplary educator through a collaborative process involving teachers, school leaders, students, families, and community members. The program culminates in the selection of a **National Teacher of the Year**, symbolizing the collective recognition of all educators across the country.

In Rhode Island, the Teacher of the Year is selected through a **multi-stage process** that begins with nominations from students, principals, teachers, and administrators. Finalists are then reviewed by a selection committee that evaluates candidates' biographies, conducts interviews, and reads personal essays, ensuring that the chosen educator reflects both excellence in the classroom and leadership within the school community.

This legislation is grounded in a core belief that **those closest to the classroom --students and teachers --must have a seat at the table** when it comes to shaping policies that directly impact teaching, learning, and equity in our schools. Every day, students and teachers experience the real impacts of our education policies—in classroom practices, resource allocation, curriculum decisions, and school climate. By elevating their voices, we acknowledge their value and show that we trust students and educators as partners in building an equitable public education system.

Engaging young people and educators in board decisions allows their unique perspectives to influence policies that shape the education system and future opportunities for all Rhode Island students. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts to amplify youth and educator voices and to provide authentic opportunities for both groups to help lead the policy decisions that impact their lives and work.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.