



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

Testimony Re: House Bill 7905, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Tuition Waiver Pilot Program for Children in Foster Care
House Committee on Finance

May 8, 2024

Kelsey Bala, Policy Analyst

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We would also like to thank Representative Casimiro for sponsoring this important bill and Representatives Noret, Caldwell, Boylan, McGaw, Kazarian, Diaz, Tanzi, and Cruz for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 7905, which would establish the Tuition Waiver Pilot Program at Rhode Island College for youth in Rhode Island foster care.

Rhode Island children in foster care often experience multiple placements, lose contact with family members and siblings, and overwhelmingly have overlooked educational, physical, and mental health needs. Multiple, prolonged, and unstable placements can negatively affect children's long-term well-being and academic achievement.

As of the 2017-2018 school year in Rhode Island, data on reading and math proficiency and high school graduation for students in foster care is publicly available. Since this data was made available, we have a clearer picture of the disparate educational outcomes youth in foster care experience compared to their peers. Most troubling is the high school graduation rate among children in foster care. Among the Class of 2023, 84% of Rhode Island students graduated high school in four years, compared to 51% of students in foster care, the lowest rate of any student subgroup.

Additionally, less than 1% of youth in foster care in Rhode Island obtain a college degree. Within the next decade, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education. This would leave many youth who have experienced foster care disproportionately left out of economic advancement opportunities and financial security if they are unable to obtain a postsecondary degree. This poses both an individual and societal cost.

We know that many youth who experience foster care possess the academic ability and interest to pursue higher education, but face barriers to reaching that goal. We believe the establishment of this Tuition Waiver Pilot Program will improve the educational attainment outcomes for our youth in foster care. The value of obtaining a college degree has a lifelong impact. It is well documented that there are not only professional and personal advantages to achieving a postsecondary degree, but it is directly associated with financial stability and independence.

rikids@rikidscount.org
www.rikidscount.org

The high cost of postsecondary education is cited as the primary barrier youth in foster care experience when considering attending college. **For those who do pursue a college degree and decide to drop out of their programs, nearly 50% of them do so because they cannot afford to continue.**

To combat this financial barrier, 37 states have instituted tuition waiver programs for students who experienced foster care. Texas has operated one of the largest tuition and fee waiver programs in the nation for 30 years. Since its implementation, evaluation studies of the program have shown that **the students who accessed the waiver were 3.5 times more likely than their peers in foster care to graduate with a postsecondary education degree.**

Estimated Number of Foster Youth Graduating from High School Each Year

Cohort Year	# in Cohort	4-year graduates	5-year graduates	6-year graduates
2018	59	26	6	3
2019	77	31	8	
2020	111	57		

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Cohort Graduation Rates. The 2020 cohort began 9th grade during the 2020-2021 school year and expected to graduate in spring of 2024.

In 2024, a total of 68 students in foster care will graduate from high school – 57 are expected in 4 years, eight in 5 years, and three in 6 years. This is not a large population, but with the establishment of the Tuition Waiver Pilot Program, we can ensure that all of our most vulnerable youth are able to both access higher education and have the appropriate nonacademic financial support needed to persist and complete their degrees.

We urge you to pass House Bill 7905, as we believe it is an important step to eliminate barriers to postsecondary educational attainment and will help improve long-term outcomes and experiences among our youth who have experienced foster care. This is a small population of young people, and the costs of providing this benefit will not be large, but to these students this investment will make a huge impact.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.