

Letter in Opposition to House Bill H5389

April 3, 2025

Dear Members of the House Finance Committee,

I am writing to express my **strong opposition to House Bill H5389**, introduced by Representatives Slater and Diaz, to change section 16-7.1-5 of the Paul W. Crowley Rhode Island Student Investment Initiative. I am a parent of two current Providence Public School students who attend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School, and one future student who will be starting kindergarten in Fall 2026. My oldest daughter, a fifth grader, was in kindergarten when the state took over the Providence Public School Department (PPSD). I became involved at both the school and district/state level almost immediately. In addition to participating in the school's Parent-Teacher Organization, I applied for and was selected to participate in one of the Community Design Teams organized by RIDE to involve the community in generating the goals and initiatives to be included in the Turnaround Action Plan (TAP) for PPSD. There were three Community Design Teams (Engaged Communities, World Class Talent, Excellence in Learning), and I was appointed co-chair of the "Engaged Communities" Design Team and worked closely and intensively for many months with parents, educators, and members of community based organizations to research, propose, and justify goals to be included within the district's TAP. I have remained highly involved with the district as first a member and, for several years now, co-chair of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC), a group of parents who meet monthly with the Superintendent and members of his team to engage in bilateral dialogue and debate about anything and everything pertaining to the district. I am proud of the role we play in raising concerns and providing feedback, both positive and negative, directly to the key players in the district. I believe that it is through this kind of mutually respectful collaboration that progress is made, and our students are the ones who benefit.

My opposition to House Bill H5389 is three-fold. First, I **disagree with removing the authority of the Commissioner of Education to withhold funding** from municipalities that owe money, also referred to as "debtor communities." The emphasis in the bill appears to be on the Commissioner's withholding of funds in response to a municipality not paying the amount it is required to contribute to the schools. This makes sense given that this is what just played out in Providence. As a parent who has been advocating for adequate funding for our children's educations, I was in full support of the Commissioner using whatever authority she had to enforce the City's responsibility to contribute the amount required by the terms of the Crowley Act. The City has been negligent in its funding of the schools for decades, and our students have paid the price. Something needed to change. However, my understanding is that this is not the only reason a Commissioner may choose to withhold funds. For example, the Commissioner may also withhold funds if a municipality is not providing special education services as required by law. In this instance, I think most reasonable people would agree that a range of options should be available to the Commissioner, including withholding funding if other avenues have not been successful in addressing such an egregious issue. This authority is not unique to Rhode Island. It is granted to the Commissioner's counterparts in Massachusetts and Vermont, among other places. I fear that this change is being proposed by individuals who are unhappy with the state takeover of PPSD and the fact that the City was held to its financial

obligation, and the ripple effects on other parts of our education system are not being appropriately considered.

The second reason for my opposition to H5389 is related: I **strongly oppose the modifications made to the funding requirements by a municipality whose schools are being managed by the State.** Limiting the increase in contributions by the school board in a district under state control to 20% of any increase in taxes issued by the city or town where the school is located has the potential to result in funding that is woefully inadequate to address the needs of students. The city should be expected to increase its investment in its school district (aka its students) at a rate comparable to the state's increase in contributions. It is baffling to me why a city would not want to invest in its students and schools, since they are key to any city's long-term success. This unnecessary restriction will only hinder our students access to the high quality educations they deserve.

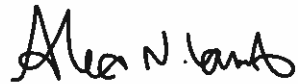
Finally, the third reason for my opposition to H5389 is the **appointment of a "fiscal overseer" for any and all financial matters for a district under state control.** This institutes yet another layer of bureaucracy in a system that already has many moving parts. One of the concerns highlighted in the Johns Hopkins report that prompted the takeover of PPSD in the first place was the fact that there was too much bureaucracy in the district, which rendered it inefficient. We are trying to move forward, and this change would be moving us backward. Moreover, I was struck by the fact that the Commissioner would not be included on the list of people this fiscal overseer has to report to on a monthly basis, despite the fact that the Commissioner would be a primary authority related to any takeover. Once again, I fear this change is potentially retaliatory for the fact that PPSD and RIDE held firm in their expectation that Providence dedicate the appropriate amount of funds to their schools. Changes like these, with significant implications for students, should not be wielded as weapons by the adults in charge, but should be considered based upon how they will affect student outcomes.

In summary, there are good things happening at PPSD right now, even if no one seems to want to talk about it. My daughter's school was designated a Blue Ribbon school by the Federal Department of Education for closing the achievement gap. This is the first elementary school in Providence to receive this recognition, but I am confident that it will not be the last. PAC and the District Wide Advisory Council are avenues for families and community members to be actively engaged with the district. RICAS scores are improving and education gaps are getting narrower. There is still a long way to go, but we are on the right track. **This bill is an unnecessary and potentially damaging distraction from the progress being made by PPSD under the control of the State.**

Moreover, in my experience over the years I have been involved, those who are promoting bills like these are NOT the families of the students who are impacted by these decisions. So often I have listened to testimony related to the Crowley Act and the takeover being provided by individuals who do not have "skin in the game," so to speak. They might be teachers and/or constituents of other districts. The legislators hearing these bills and making decisions often do not represent Providence districts. **I urge you to prioritize the voices of the individuals whose children are impacted by these changes.** I believe you will hear that most of them sound a lot like me.

Decisions like these should always be about the students and only the students. Please vote against H5389 and continue to allow the Commissioner to have the authority needed to do what's right for our students. Their futures depend upon it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alexis N. Lamb". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alexis N. Lamb, Ph.D.
Providence Parent & Co-Chair of the Providence Parent Advisory Council
Providence District 4