



Dear Co-Chairs and Members of the Working Group,

One of the strengths of the Rhode Island Funding Formula is that it prioritizes the student and his or her needs. Over the last 5 years, our state has been on a path towards creating a more equitable system for our students. Seventy percent of RI students are receiving more state support for their education under the formula. In urban communities alone, more than \$50 million in additional state dollars have gone towards education. This significant investment has been due in part to the “weight” for free/reduced priced lunch, acknowledging that students from low socio-economic backgrounds require more resources. As we move towards creating a fairer student-based funding formula, looking at what other unique student needs require additional resources only makes sense. It is also important that the focus remain on students and their needs, rather than the type of public schools they attend. This is how the funding formula provides support for students eligible for free/reduced priced lunch, and it should be how it provides resources for students with additional needs.

Unfortunately, the conversation around public charter school funding has, in the past, been less about meeting the needs of a particular student and more about the type of school that student attends. The fact is charters have to meet all legal obligations that traditional schools do when it comes to students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). It has been suggested by some that districts should withhold all special education funding from public charter schools, but as long as charters maintain the legal obligation to serve these students they should also have the opportunity to access the funds required to serve them.

All public schools, whether traditional, charter or state, are challenged by students in need of out of district accommodations because they can and do have extraordinary costs. Even though charters serve fewer of these students the impact is just as significant. A single student whose needs cost in the tens of thousands if not over hundred thousand dollars, will significantly impact a charter that is just a quarter or even a tenth the size of a traditional district. In this case, the solution is not to cut these dollars from charter schools, but instead for the state to more fully fund these students. All schools are better protected from the unpredictable, incredibly burdensome costs associated with educating these students when the funding remains intact. This can be achieved by lowering the multiplier on high cost special education with the state fully funding all costs above a manageable threshold.

It is also easy to compare enrollment between types of schools. Public charters schools do, on the whole, serve fewer special education students. But we serve far more students of color, more students who qualify for free/reduced priced lunch, and students with limited English proficiency than traditional public schools. Even within the sector, there are large variances -- percentages of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in public charter schools vary from 8% to 23%. Traditional public schools have just as much, if not more, variance in enrollment for special education students (from 9 to 24%), and vary in spending beyond just enrollment differences.

Considering the wide-range of IEPs across public schools, a student-centered approach that meets the needs of students with disabilities must be careful to not create perverse incentives that can lead to over-identification. This is especially important given that Rhode Island's IEP population is well above national averages and has only recently begun to decline more toward the norm. Mayoral academies work hard to not issue an IEP if it is not necessary, in part because our schools serve 75% kids of color and research has shown these students are disproportionately over-identified as having disabilities.¹ Additionally, students with disabilities have been very costly to educate in Rhode Island and we need to be certain that state policy enables and encourages providing services efficiently. For example, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy (BVP) contracts with the Central Falls School District to provide services to BVP special education students, serving these students better and more efficiently than setting up an additional infrastructure to provide these services. We need to be careful that any additional funding for special education students does not lock us into very costly models of service that have been thus far dismally ineffective for our most vulnerable populations.

I am optimistic that we can continue to strengthen how we fund students so that every child's needs can be met. I hope that the committee will take this opportunity to improve the formula for all students at a system-wide basis, considering strategies that better reflect the wide variance in enrollment across the state.

Sincerely,



Elsa Duré
CEO
Rhode Island Mayoral Academies

¹ U.S. Department of Education. *36th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2014*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Special Education Programs and Rehabilitative Services