

Fair Funding for Rhode Island's Schools

Enact the Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act
House Bill 8351, Senate Bill 3015

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Blue Ribbon Commission?

It's a group created in December 2024 by the Rhode Island Foundation to study how Rhode Island pays for its public schools. The group included teachers, parents, local officials, and students. After months of research and interviews, every member agreed on the same recommendations, which is rare and shows how important this issue is.

What's the problem with how schools are funded right now?

Rhode Island's current system was created in 2010 and hasn't kept up with the times.

Here's the basic problem: the state sends money to schools based on a formula, but that formula leaves a lot of real costs like busing students to school, maintaining buildings, and services for young children with disabilities. Those costs are paid fully by cities and towns.

Cities and towns with more money can handle it. Those with less money can't. That means kids in lower-income communities often end up with fewer resources, not because their needs are smaller, but because their town can't afford to fill the gaps.

What does the Commission want to change?

Four main things:

1. Count the real cost of education. Create a new baseline, called the Core Education Amount, that includes all the costs of running a school, not just some of them. This way, the state and local communities share the full picture fairly.
2. Fund students based on what they need. Students with disabilities, students still learning English, students from low-income families, and students in specialized programs all need more support. The new system would send more money to schools for those students, and the amount would match their actual needs.
3. Make sure every town pitches in. Towns would be required to contribute to school funding based on how much property wealth they have. This helps make sure every child is fully funded, no matter where they live.
4. Show people where the money goes. Schools would have to publicly report how they spend education dollars and show whether that spending is helping students learn. Anyone could look it up.

What is the “Core Education Amount”?

It's a new, more honest way of calculating what it costs to educate a child. The old formula only counted some expenses. The new one would include transportation, building upkeep, and other costs that schools deal with every day.

The state would also take over some of the biggest, most unpredictable bills, like expensive special education services and legacy teacher pension costs.

Will this raise my property taxes?

Not necessarily. In fact, it could lower the pressure on local budgets. Some of the biggest costs, like expensive special education services and legacy teacher pensions, would shift to the state. That could free up local money and reduce the budget swings that make it hard for towns to plan from year to year.

Most towns already contribute as much as the new plan requires. The main change is that the contribution becomes a formal rule, so every child is protected equally.

What about young children, does this help them too?

Yes. Right now, only about one in three preschool-age children in Rhode Island gets screened for developmental delays. In some cities, the number is even lower. Many kids who need early help never get identified.

The plan would make developmental screening available to all children ages 3 to 5, with the state taking responsibility for it. It would also make sure that preschoolers who receive special education services are counted in school funding, closing a gap that currently forces districts to pay for those services with money meant for other things.

What about charter schools?

The Commission didn't take a side on whether Rhode Island should have more or fewer charter schools. But it did say this: any student in any public school deserves equal funding. The plan would make funding more consistent between traditional public schools and charter schools.

How much will this cost?

Rhode Island currently spends about \$3 billion a year on public schools. Under this plan, that would rise to about \$3.38 billion. The increase reflects costs that were always there, they just weren't being shared fairly. The state would cover a larger share than it does today.

When would this happen?

Two bills have been introduced in the Rhode Island General Assembly:

- **Senate Bill 3015** was introduced by Senators Gallo, DiPalma, Tikoian, Ciccone, Burke, LaMountain, Raptakis, Pearson, Urso, and Zurier. It has been sent to the Senate Finance Committee for consideration.
- **House Bill 8351** was introduced by Representatives McNamara, Cortvriend, Ackerman, Tanzi, Kislak, Ajello, Furtado, J. Brien, Sanchez, and Phillips. It has been sent to the House Finance Committee for consideration.

Both bills are called the Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act. If passed, the new system would be fully in place by 2030. Some changes could start sooner, and no school would lose funding during the transition.

What exactly would the bill require?

Here's what the legislation would actually do:

- Set a new per-student funding baseline, the Core Education Amount, calculated every year based on real costs, adjusted for inflation.
- Send more money to schools for students who need more support: low-income students (50% more), students with disabilities (based on their level of need), students learning English (based on their proficiency level), and students in specialized career and technical programs.
- Have the state take over the biggest unpredictable costs: expensive special education services, out-of-district transportation, early childhood screening, and legacy teacher pension obligations.
- Require every town to contribute to school funding based on its property wealth, or face a reduction in state aid.
- Require every school district to publish an annual spending plan, show how that spending connects to student outcomes, and undergo an independent audit. The state would maintain a public online dashboard so anyone can compare spending and results across districts.
- Require the state to share funding estimates with schools by March 1 each year, so districts can plan their budgets with enough notice.
- Create a new independent 11-member board to provide oversight and help struggling districts improve.

How can I help?

Contact your State Representative and State Senator and ask them to support House Bill 8351 and Senate Bill 3015. Find your legislators at vote.sos.ri.gov. For template letters, phone scripts, and social media posts, visit rifoundation.org/fairfunding.