

Fair Funding for Rhode Island's Schools: What It Means, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do

A guide for legislators.

Rhode Island's school funding formula hasn't been fundamentally updated in 15 years. How much is invested in a child's education depends too heavily on where they live, not what they need to succeed.

Costs like transportation, building upkeep, and early childhood screening fall entirely on municipalities, regardless of their ability to pay.

Students who need extra support, including English language learners and students with disabilities, often don't receive adequate resources.

School administrators must make major budget decisions without knowing what funding they will receive from the state until the last minute, making long-term planning nearly impossible.

The Solution: Four Reforms, One Clear Consensus

The Blue Ribbon Commission, 18 Rhode Island leaders including educators, parents, municipal officials, union representatives, charter school supporters, and community advocates – spent a year studying Rhode Island's school funding and reached full consensus on four reforms:



Fund the Full Cost of Education

Costs like transportation, building upkeep, and early childhood screening currently fall entirely on municipalities. The state should share these costs fairly so that local budgets aren't strained by expenses that benefit all students statewide



Require Local Contributions from All Municipalities

Every community should invest in its schools based on its actual financial capacity, not an outdated, overly complex formula that doesn't account for the full cost of education.



Fund Students Based on Their Actual Needs

Students who are economically disadvantaged, are English language learners, or have disabilities require more support to succeed. The funding formula should reflect that reality by directing more resources to those who need them most.



Require Transparency and Accountability

Every education dollar should be tied to student outcomes. This means requiring public reporting and independent oversight so families, educators, and taxpayers can see how funds are being used and whether they're making a difference.

Common Questions

Can Rhode Island afford these reforms?

The Commission's recommendations are designed to be implemented in a phased, fiscally responsible way. Some elements – such as the state assuming legacy teacher pension liabilities – actually reduce long-term costs. Fairer funding also means smarter spending, with stronger accountability built in.

Isn't the current system good enough?

The formula hasn't been meaningfully updated in 15 years. Leaders from across the political spectrum – including union leaders, charter school advocates, municipal officials, and parent organizers – all agree it needs reform. That kind of broad consensus is rare and significant.

How quickly would the new system take effect if the bills pass?

House Bill 8351 and Senate Bill 3015 require full implementation by fiscal year 2030. This gives RIDE, districts, and municipalities time to align systems and budgets, while allowing earlier implementation where possible. Existing aid programs continue during the transition to prevent any funding shortfalls.

House Bill 8351 and Senate Bill 3015 will enact the Commission's recommendations into law. Key provisions include:

- **Core Education Amount:** Replaces the current Core Instruction Amount as the new per-pupil baseline, calculated annually using regional expenditure data and adjusted for inflation.
- **Student weights:** A 50% weight for economically disadvantaged students, tiered weights for multilingual learners and students with disabilities, and additional weights for high-cost CTE programs.
- **State cost shifts:** High-cost special education, out-of-district transportation, early childhood screening, and legacy pension liabilities shift entirely to the state, with special education reimbursements paid on a current-year basis.
- **Local contribution requirements:** Municipalities must meet a minimum contribution based on property wealth to receive state aid. Those falling short face an automatic aid reduction equal to double the shortfall, with a hardship appeals process and a 1% strategic reserve fund to support it.
- **Accountability:** Districts must adopt outcome-linked spending plans, report through UCOA, and undergo independent audits. RIDE would maintain a public dashboard comparing district spending and outcomes, with oversight from a new 11-member Fiscal Responsibility Advisory Board housed in the Office of the Auditor General.
- **Budget planning:** Preliminary state aid estimates must be shared by March 1 each year.

For detailed information about how the schools in your district may be impacted feel free to connect with us at the email or phone number listed below.