

The Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act

(House Bill 8351, Senate Bill 3015)

Frequently Asked Questions- For Youth Advocates

What's actually going on with school funding?

Rhode Island is trying to fix how it pays for public schools. Right now, the system is outdated, unfair, and hard to understand and that means some students are getting a lot less support than they deserve.

A group called the **Blue Ribbon Commission** spent months studying the problem and came up with a plan. Now that plan is sitting in the state legislature as two bills (House Bill 8351 and Senate Bill 3015), and people are pushing hard to get them passed.

Who put this together?

The Blue Ribbon Commission included teachers, community members, local officials, and education experts. It was co-chaired by Rhode Island Foundation President & CEO David Cicilline and a Georgetown University professor named Nora Gordon.

Here's something worth knowing: **students were part of this process**. The Commission brought together a Youth Working Group of 14 students from eight school districts across Rhode Island. Their input actually shaped the recommendations.

So what did students say?

The student group had some clear priorities:

- **Transportation is a problem.** Getting to school reliably shouldn't be a struggle, but the current system treats it like an afterthought. Students called it "a universal burden."
- **Students with disabilities deserve real support.** Adequate funding for special education isn't just a legal requirement – it's the right thing to do.
- **Mental health matters.** Students want funding for social workers and counselors, not just academics.
- **Be transparent.** Students want to know how their school gets funded and where the money actually goes.

What's broken about the current system?

Rhode Island's current school funding formula was written in 2010. The world has changed a lot since then, and the formula hasn't kept up.

The main problem: it only counts some of the costs of running a school. Things like bus transportation, building maintenance, and early childhood special education aren't included in the formula – so towns and cities have to pay for those on their own. Communities with less money can't always cover these costs, which means students in lower-income districts end up with fewer resources.

The formula is also incredibly complicated. Most local leaders can't even explain how their school funding gets calculated from year to year.

What's the fix?

The Commission recommends four big changes:

- 1. Count the real cost of education.** Create a new "Core Education Amount" (CEA) that includes *all* the costs of running a school – not just the narrow slice the current formula covers. This makes the true cost visible so it can be shared more fairly between the state and local communities.
- 2. Fund students based on what they actually need.** Not every student needs the same level of support. The proposal increases funding for low-income students, adds tiered funding for students with disabilities (based on their actual needs), adjusts funding for multilingual learners based on their English proficiency level, and adds support for students in expensive career and technical education (CTE) programs.
- 3. Make sure every municipality contributes.** Towns and cities would be required to chip in for education based on their property wealth, so that every student's education is fully funded, not just kids in wealthy zip codes.
- 4. Make it transparent.** Schools would have to publicly report how they spend their money and connect those numbers to student outcomes. Think of it like a public dashboard where anyone – students, parents, taxpayers – can see what's working and what isn't.

What's the "Core Education Amount"?

It's the new way of calculating how much money each student's education actually costs. The current formula uses a narrow number that ignores a lot of real expenses. The CEA uses a broader calculation based on what districts actually spend across the region on transportation, building upkeep, early childhood programs, and more.

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

How would this help students with disabilities and English language learners?

Right now, there's **no extra state money** for students with disabilities, even though schools are legally required to serve them. For multilingual learners, the funding doesn't change based on how much support a student actually needs.

Under the new system:

- A student brand-new to the country who needs intensive language instruction would get more funding than one who's nearly fluent – because their needs are genuinely different.
- Students with disabilities would get tiered funding based on the actual cost of their required services.
- For the highest-need students requiring placement outside their home district, the state would cover the full cost.

Does this affect charter schools?

The Commission doesn't take a position on whether Rhode Island should have more or fewer charter schools, that's a question for lawmakers and the public. But the proposal would make funding more consistent across all public schools, whether traditional or charter. The goal: every student deserves equal funding, regardless of which public school they attend.

How much would this cost?

Rhode Island currently spends about \$3 billion a year on public education (from state and local sources combined). Under this proposal, that would rise to about \$3.38 billion because more of the actual costs would be part of the shared system instead of hidden in local budgets.

When would this happen?

Both bills have been introduced in the General Assembly. If they pass, full implementation would happen by fiscal year 2030, giving schools and towns time to adjust. But some improvements could start right away.

What can I do?

Contact your State Representative and State Senator and ask them to support House Bill 8351 and Senate Bill 3015. You can find your legislators at vote.sos.ri.gov.

There's also an advocacy toolkit with template letters, phone scripts, and social media posts at rifoundation.org/fairfunding.

Your voice matters – students helped shape this proposal, and students can help get it passed.