



DEMOCRATS *for*  
EDUCATION REFORM

# Rhode Island *Policy Memo*

## *A Note From* **Our CEO**



Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's traditional advantage on education has eroded, slipping from a 26-point lead over Republicans to now trailing by three. Voters' message is clear: They want something different, but Democrats have offered more of the same.

Rhode Island illustrates both the challenge and the opportunity. The state has growing teacher attrition, low reading and math proficiency rates, and a stubbornly lagging graduation rate. Rhode Island's test scores also show a widening gap between the highest and lowest performers as well as between economically disadvantaged students and their non-economically disadvantaged peers.

Without renewed urgency and a forward-looking vision, Rhode Island risks the futures of thousands of its students. Fifty-seven percent of likely voters in Rhode Island who are registered as Democrats believe that young people today will be worse off than previous generations. The state's stagnant academic outcomes demand immediate action to avoid a generational loss of student potential, socioeconomic mobility, and economic productivity.

Across the country, several states are showing that reform can deliver real results for students—proving that progress is possible when leaders act boldly. While much of this progress is occurring in a few Republican-led states, we believe Democratic governors and gubernatorial candidates, including in Rhode Island, can claim the mantle of a results-driven education agenda that discovers what works, invests only in what works, and allows families to choose what works best for them. This is both a political and moral imperative: With the right leadership, Rhode Island can lead the nation in education, preparing every student to succeed in college, career, and life, and proving that Democrats are ready to deliver bold, forward-looking change for every child.

## *About* **This Report**

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Rhode Island through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Rhode Island's education system and the opportunity ahead.

It includes:

### **Executive Summary (pg. 3)**

Overview of Rhode Island's educational landscape and opportunity for renewed progress;

### **Policy Recommendations**

Organized around three pillars that, together, create a roadmap for measurable improvement.

- Innovation (pg. 5)
- Accountability (pg. 10)
- Choice (pg. 16)

# Executive Summary

Today, over 130,000 K–12 students depend on Rhode Island’s schools to prepare them for college, career, and life. But recent results show that the conditions necessary for the state’s students to succeed are not in place and student outcomes are suffering. Rhode Island has growing teacher attrition, low reading and math proficiency rates on state and national assessments, and a stubbornly lagging graduation rate. Rhode Island’s scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, show a widening gap between both the highest and lowest performers and between economically disadvantaged students and their non-economically disadvantaged peers.

These challenges present opportunities for the next governor to enact bold reforms that could positively impact the trajectories of over 100,000 children each year. Capacity and financial investments in the educator workforce pipeline, college and career pathways, education R&D, addressing chronic absenteeism, evidence-based literacy and math instructional materials, results-based accountability, high-quality public school options, open enrollment policies, and the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program would impact students’ lives for years to come.

Rhode Island is at a crucial moment. The state needs a leader who can not only implement urgently needed reforms but also demonstrate to the nation that sustained commitment and smart policymaking can deliver high expectations, modern learning opportunities, and lasting success for every student in Rhode Island.

## Rhode Island At a Glance

Public School Student Enrollment  
**133,829**

Chronic Absenteeism Rate  
**25%**

Students Eligible for Free or  
Reduced-Price Lunch  
**54%**

Multilingual Learners  
**15%**

Students with Disabilities  
**19%**

Students with College-Ready SAT Scores  
**24%**

High School Graduation Rate  
**84%**

Two- and Four-Year College Enrollment  
**68%**

## NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading <b>13<sup>th</sup></b>	4th-Grade Math <b>28<sup>th</sup></b>
8th-Grade Reading <b>21<sup>st</sup></b>	8th-Grade Math <b>29<sup>th</sup></b>

## Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading <b>15<sup>th</sup></b>	4th-Grade Math <b>14<sup>th</sup></b>
8th-Grade Reading <b>19<sup>th</sup></b>	8th-Grade Math <b>36<sup>th</sup></b>



## Innovation

- 1. Support and Reward Great Educators.** Adopt strategic staffing models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers where they are most needed while laying the groundwork to permanently strengthen the educator workforce pipeline.
- 2. Expand, Reinforce, and Evaluate College and Career Pathways.** Ensure every student can earn transferable college credits and career credentials by increasing high school participation in dual enrollment, career and technical education, and other college and career pathways, and evaluating outcomes for these programs.
- 3. Supercharge Innovative Practices through a New State R&D Agenda.** Enact new research priorities aligned to the state's PK-12 plan, publicize and apply research findings and update the research agenda on an annual basis.



## Accountability

- 1. Enact Changes to the School Funding Formula Recommended by a 2025 Blue Ribbon Commission.** Implement recommended changes to the statewide school funding formula, monitor the fidelity of implementation and effects, and pursue additional actions as needed.
- 2. Monitor Implementation of Evidence-Based Literacy Reforms and Apply Evidence-Based Math Reforms to Educator Preparation Programs.** Establish math standards for elementary teacher prep programs, include math experts in the review of programs, use licensure test pass rate data as part of the program review process, and publish licensure test pass rate data.
- 3. Strengthen School Improvement Requirements and Prioritize Results.** Align school report cards with rigorous NAEP benchmarks and enforce clear, transparent accountability for all schools—especially those that are chronically underperforming—while empowering families and communities to help drive improvement.



## Choice

- 1. Deepen Investments In Nontraditional Public School Models.** Expand financial and regulatory support for Community Schools, early college high schools, charter schools, magnet schools, microschoools, and other nontraditional school models that can accelerate learning outcomes and meet diverse student needs.
- 2. Enact Policy Mandating Within- and Cross-District Enrollment.** Ensure that families have unmitigated access to enrolling their children in any school within their school district or in another school district, informed by an analysis of the effects of the current open enrollment policies on access and equity.
- 3. Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit Program.** Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.



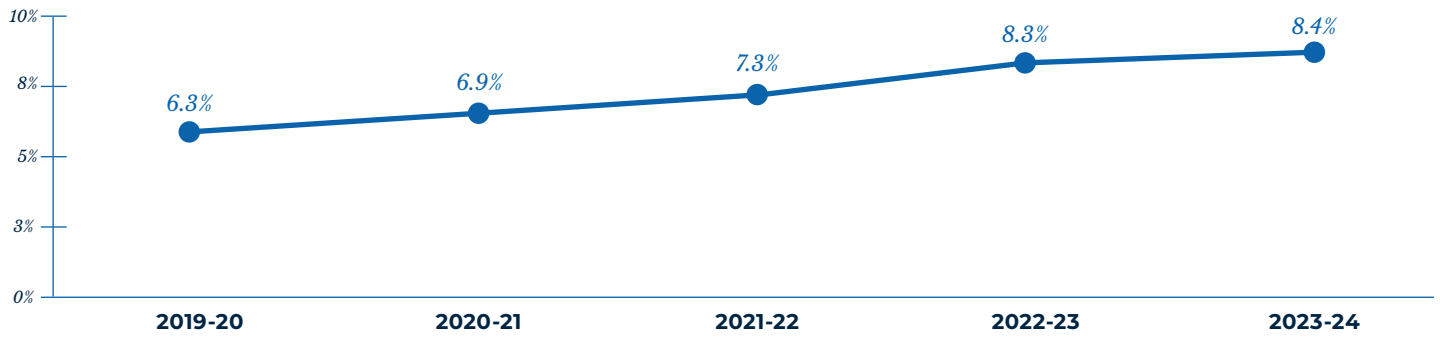
# Innovation

Rhode Island’s next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. The next governor of Rhode Island should usher in a new era of education innovation informed by the following recommendations.

## Recommendation 1: Support and reward great educators.

Rhode Island has an escalating educator workforce crisis, with a 33% increase in teacher turnover since the 2019-20 school year. With a dwindling supply, state officials [expect this issue](#) to only worsen in the coming years.

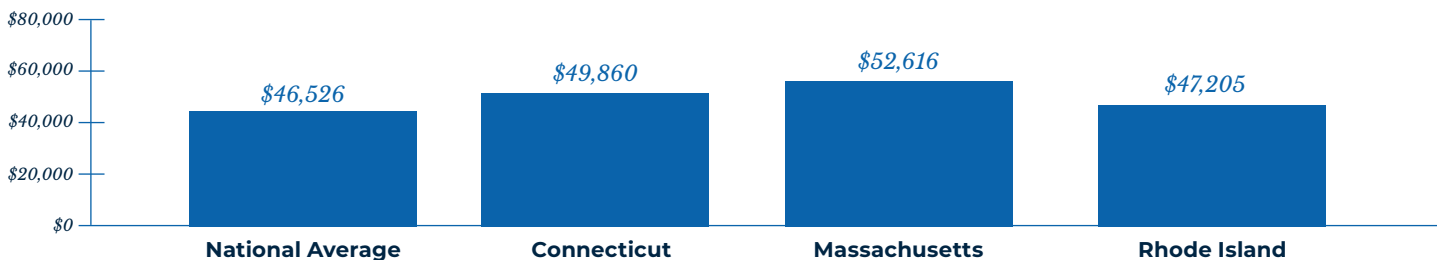
**Rhode Island’s teacher turnover is getting worse**



Source: [Rhode Island Department of Education \(2025\)](#)

Inadequate salary, unsustainable working conditions, frustrations with school leadership, and limited career growth are often among the [top reasons](#) teachers leave the profession. As high-quality teachers are widely considered to be the [most important](#) in-school driver of student outcomes, improving the quantity and quality of educators should be top priorities. And there is significant public favorability towards more financial support for teachers: [2 in 3 U.S. adults](#) support increasing teacher salaries, even at the expense of higher taxes. With Rhode Island’s average starting teacher salary sitting below that of its neighboring states, there is an urgent need for strategic approaches to staffing and compensation in order for the state to compete for top teacher talent.

**Rhode Island’s typical starting teacher salary is below its neighbors**



Source: [NEA Educator Pay Data \(2023-2024\)](#)

To help address the educator workforce crisis, we recommend incentivizing the use of [strategic staffing models](#) to accelerate student learning and scaffold educator career development, providing [supplemental pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and specializations (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms), and creating a statewide task force charged with examining Rhode Island’s educator workforce pipeline and producing recommendations to permanently strengthen it.

One example of innovative policy directly impacting teaching and learning: North Carolina’s [comprehensive redesign](#) of the state’s teaching profession has included the adoption of a strategic staffing model—[BEST NC Advanced Teaching Roles](#)—which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an additional 1 month of growth in math and science compared to comparable schools without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an additional 1.4 months of reading growth for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

In addition, several states and school districts across the country have implemented supplemental pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and specializations, [with promising results](#) showing that this can be an effective strategy to address teacher shortages where they are worst. For instance, the [Talent Transfer Initiative \(TTI\)](#) was implemented in 10 school districts in 7 states to incentivize high-performing teachers to move into schools serving the most disadvantaged students. Teachers were offered up to \$20,000 paid in installments for a two-year commitment. The initiative was highly successful: Almost 9 out of 10 targeted vacancies were filled, student achievement increased, and retention rates were higher for teachers who received the incentive.

This strategy can be scaled through [grant programs](#) tailored to address chronic shortages, [pay scheme flexibilities](#) for qualifying districts, [scholarship programs](#) that cover full tuition costs for teacher preparation programs in exchange for a multi-year commitment to a hard-to-staff assignment or specialization, or even a [sliding scale tax credit](#) for teachers based on the poverty level of the school in which they teach. For instance, a two-year scholarship program could build on Rhode Island’s [Promise Scholarship Program](#)—which provides free tuition for eligible candidates completing an associate’s degree at the Community College of Rhode Island—by extending the tuition-free guarantee to students who subsequently enroll in and complete a qualifying teacher preparation program and commit to serving in a hard-to-staff role. This would help build a pipeline of qualified candidates to the schools that need them the most.

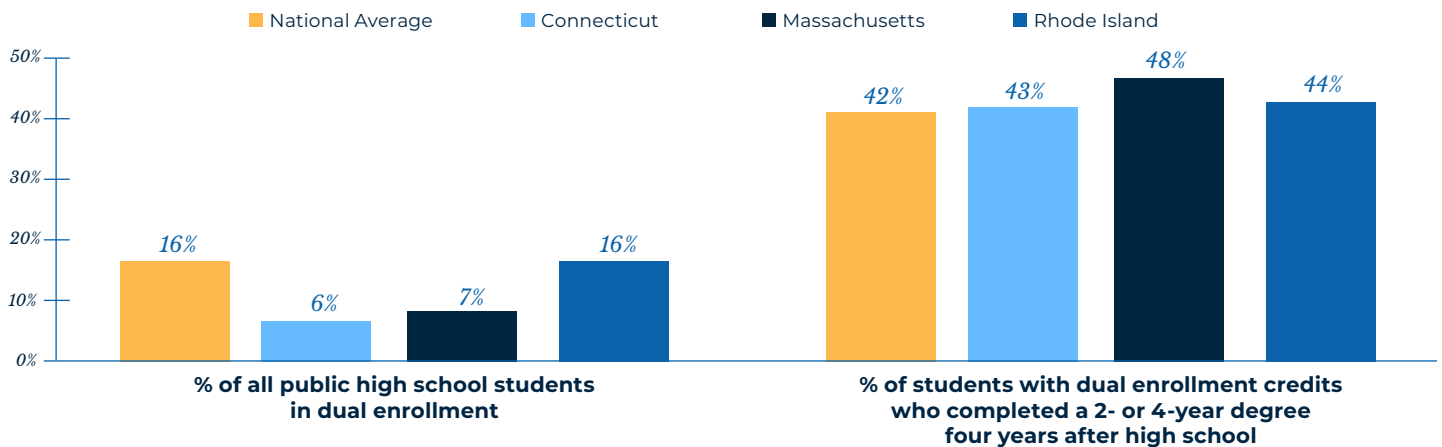
Finally, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen the entirety of Rhode Island’s educator workforce pipeline. This will require a coordinated effort by state stakeholders to examine and act on challenges compromising the pipeline’s integrity. A roadmap already exists for this work: New America, in collaboration with 23 national education policy organizations, has published a comprehensive [Six-Strand Strategy for Educator Excellence](#) to create a framework for strengthening the educator workforce. Rhode Island could utilize this roadmap to inform a statewide task force’s investigation into the state’s greatest areas of improvement and ensure the sustained integrity of the educator pipeline.

## Recommendation 2:

### Expand, reinforce, and evaluate college and career pathways.

Rhode Island has made notable investments in college and career pathways over the last several years. [PrepareRI](#) represents a statewide commitment to preparing the state’s students for success in college and their careers, and has helped [bring state agencies together](#) to achieve this goal. One feature of PrepareRI’s programming, dual enrollment—which has a [host of positive outcomes](#)—has [increased the likelihood](#) of participating Rhode Island students completing college four years after high school.

#### Rhode Island leads its peers on dual enrollment participation and has strong returns on degree completion



Sources: [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey \(2022-23\)](#); [Community College Research Center \(2024\)](#)

However, there remains significant work to do to improve college and career pathways so that Rhode Island students are ready for life after high school. Despite statewide investments, [fewer than 1 in 4](#) Rhode Island students are college-ready, and there is [misalignment](#) between the credentials in highest demand and the credentials students are earning through career and technical education (CTE) programs. Furthermore, there remain [equity gaps in access](#) to these programs.

New Jersey is a strong example to follow for college readiness. [Nearly half](#) of its students meet both college-ready literacy and math benchmarks on the SAT, which is the highest rate in the nation. While there are many factors that might contribute to this outcome across the K-12 span, significant contributors include the state's [high preschool enrollment rate](#), an [appealing teacher workforce environment](#), robust [academic standards](#) aligned to college readiness, a comprehensive [state longitudinal data system](#) to track outcomes, high [access to and participation in](#) advanced coursework, and a [coordinated college readiness program](#) between high schools and community colleges. These compounding features of New Jersey's education policies help students get a head start on their education and continue building on that early advantage through strong educational opportunities throughout their K-12 schooling.

When it comes to career readiness, Indiana is [emerging as a national leader](#). In recent years, the state has taken several actions that amount to a comprehensive reimagining of the education-to-career pipeline. Indiana has [revised its graduation requirements](#) to include employability skills and postsecondary readiness competencies, [provides scholarships](#) to high school students participating in work-based learning opportunities, requires career [awareness education](#) and [discovery meetings](#) for students, and [built a longitudinal data system](#) to track key outcomes. The state is also conducting an [ROI analysis](#) on its career and technical education (CTE) programming. In the years to come, Indiana will likely be the model for many states in preparing K-12 students for the workforce.

The next governor of Rhode Island has the opportunity to help the state lead the nation in college and career pathways by sharpening the focus on outcomes. They should build on the work of PrepareRI by prioritizing evaluations of college and career programs, including [ROI analyses](#) on various career pathways to ensure that high-demand fields are prioritized and that lead to a livable wage for students pursuing them. This will help students and families understand what pathways might best help students build a successful life after high school.

In addition, although officials have [begun to integrate](#) college and career readiness metrics into Rhode Island's high school graduation requirements, the implementation period means that it will be up to the next governor to ensure that this important accountability tool is implemented with fidelity and yields the transformation promised for the state's students and economy.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Supercharge Innovative Practices through a New State R&D Agenda.**

Many of the most important modernizations of education practice, [such as the Science of Reading and multi-tiered systems of support](#), began as federal R&D investments that pointed the way to evidence-based improvements. With [cuts to the federal government's education R&D arm](#) jeopardizing its role in advancing the field for the foreseeable future, it is essential that states invest resources into discovering what works for their communities.

The good news is that Rhode Island already understands the importance of education R&D, as is evidenced by its [previous development](#) of a research agenda. However, the agenda's lifespan expired in 2025. The next governor of Rhode Island should carry forward this practice by enacting new research priorities aligned to the state's [Strategic Plan for PK-12 Education](#), ensuring that research findings are publicized and applied, and directing the state department of education to update the research agenda on an annual basis.

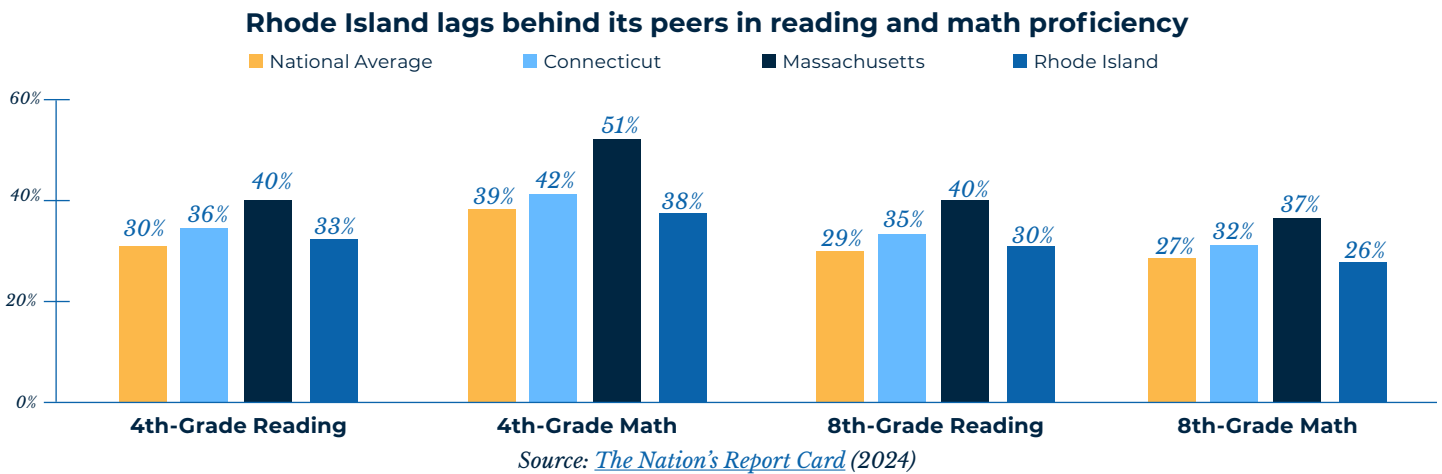
As Rhode Island's education leadership considers future education R&D, one urgent priority area is the safe and responsible application of AI in education. While the emerging technology provides many benefits, it also poses [great potential for harm](#) if not carefully managed and integrated into students' lives. Rhode Island should begin investments in uncovering and applying best practices regarding the safe and responsible use of AI within schools, starting with existing [federal recommendations](#). As this technology inevitably becomes more commonplace in our lives, it is essential that we protect children from its harm while equipping them with ways to harness its potential.



## Accountability

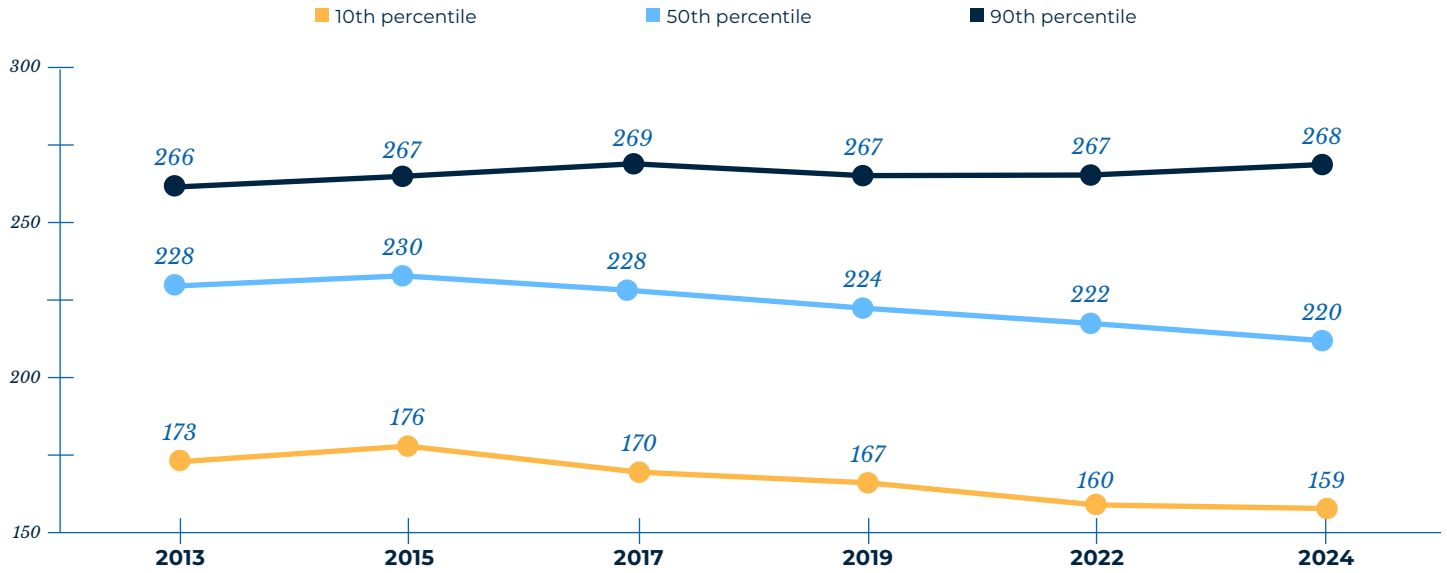
Rhode Island's next governor must build a shared sense of urgency around creating a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups. The state's stagnant academic outcomes demand immediate action to avoid a generational loss of student potential, socioeconomic mobility, and economic productivity.

**Rhode Island's educational outcomes are concerning.** On the 2024 NAEP—the only nationally representative test that compares student achievement across all 50 states—**only 1 in 3 Rhode Island students demonstrated proficiency** in 4th or 8th-grade reading, while fewer **than 2 in 5 demonstrated proficiency** in 4th-grade math. Worse still, **barely 1 in 4 demonstrated proficiency** in 8th-grade math. These national assessment results align with the state test's results; only 32% of Rhode Island 3rd and 8th-grade students met expectations on the 2024 RICAS [reading assessment](#) and only 25% met expectations on the [math assessment](#).



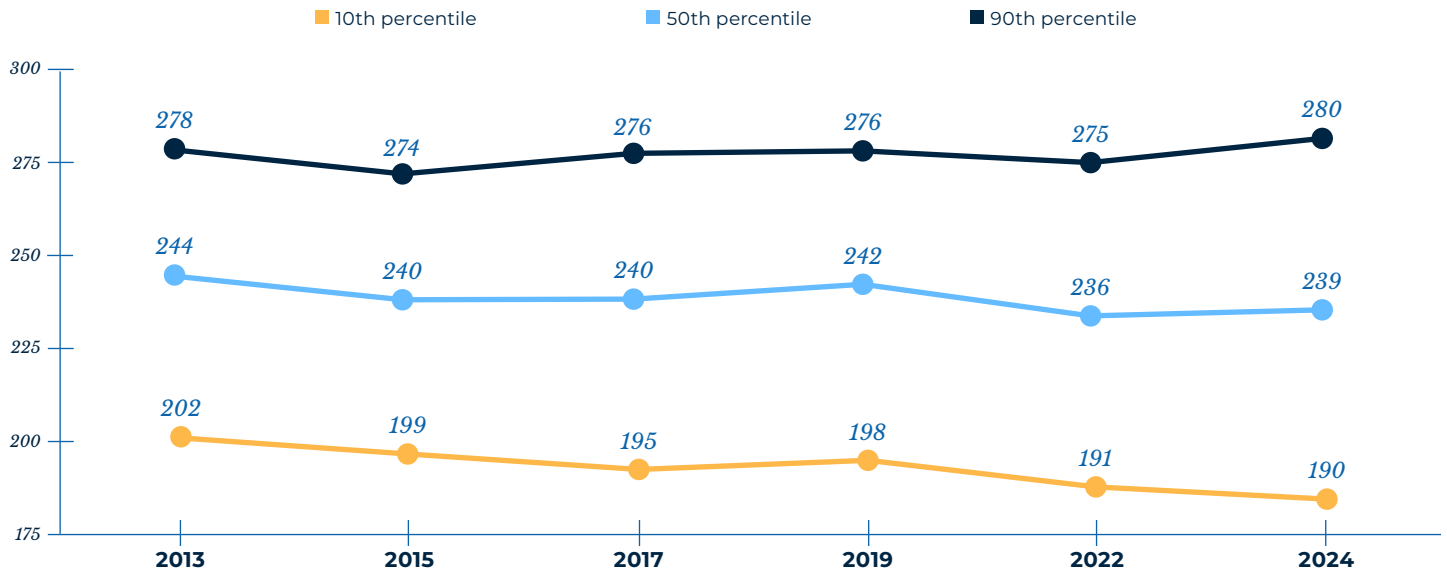
One factor driving these low proficiency rates is the widening gap between the highest-performing students and the lowest-performing students. Since 2013, the gap between students in the 10th percentile and the 90th percentile on each of the NAEP tests has gradually expanded. In other words, the state is failing to support its academically struggling students more now than it did over a decade ago. Similarly, the performance gaps between the state's economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students on each test are among the widest in the nation, further demonstrating that Rhode Island is not doing enough to intervene for students who need the most help, including its [multilingual learners](#).

### Rhode Island's 4th-Grade Reading NAEP Scores by Percentile



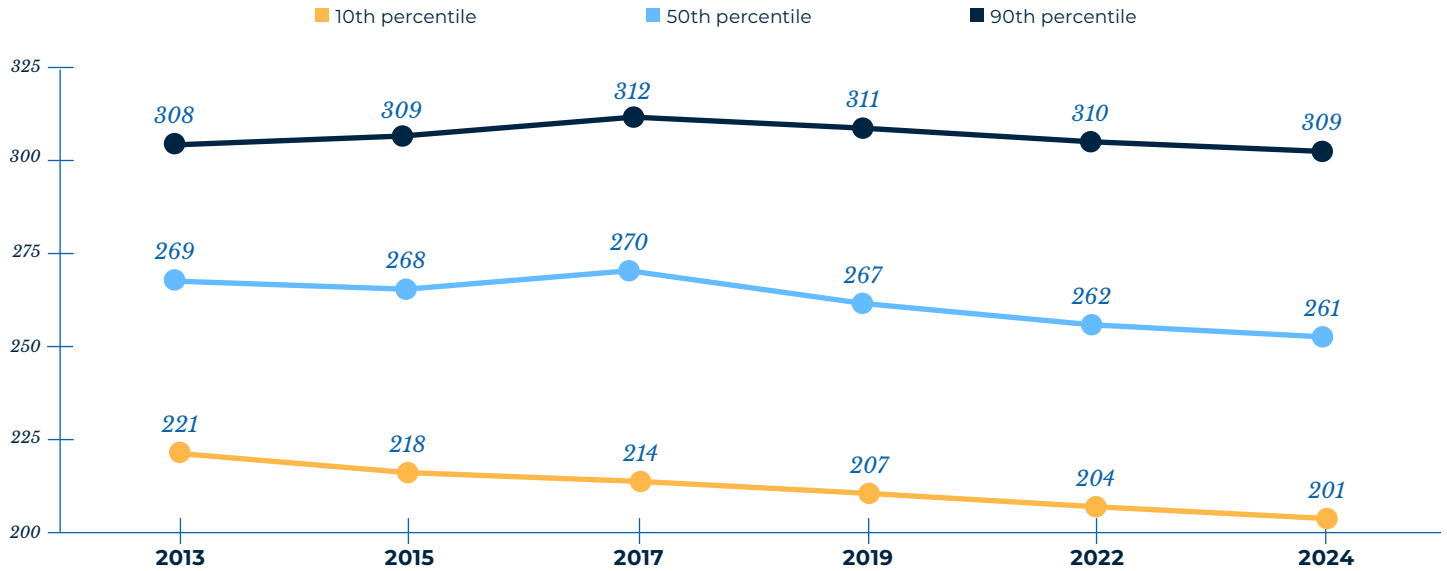
Source: *The Nation's Report Card* (2024)

### Rhode Island's 4th-Grade Math NAEP Scores by Percentile



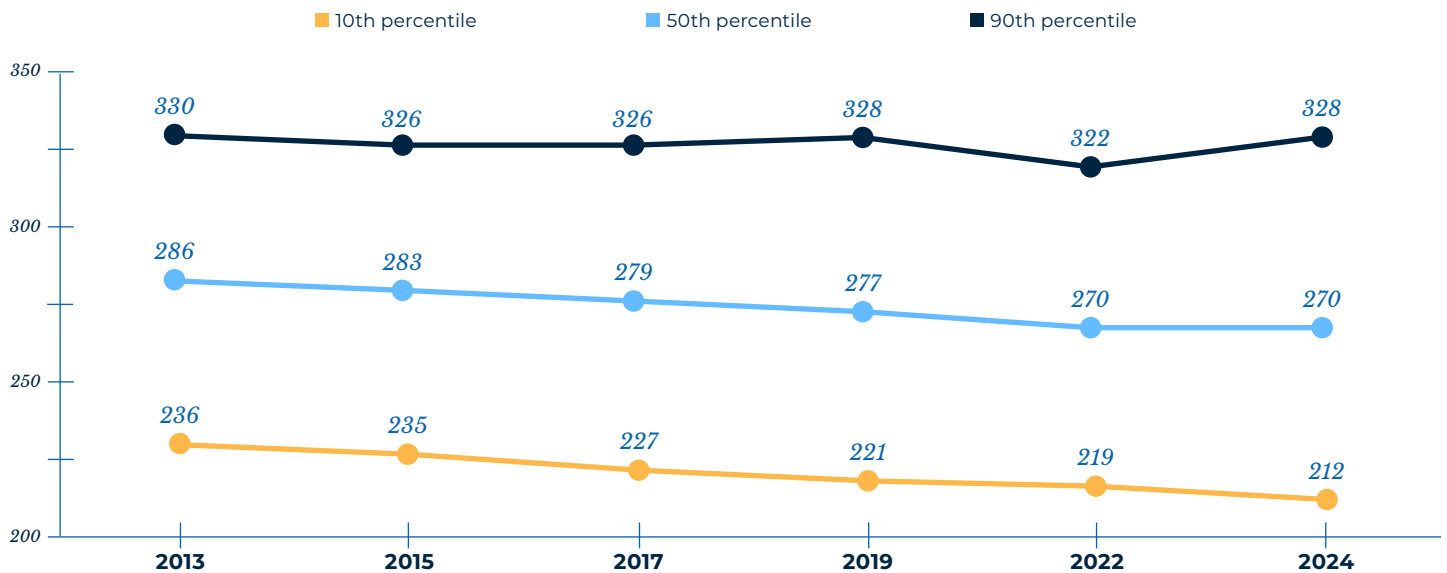
Source: *The Nation's Report Card* (2024)

### Rhode Island's 8th-Grade Reading NAEP Scores by Percentile



Source: *The Nation's Report Card* (2024)

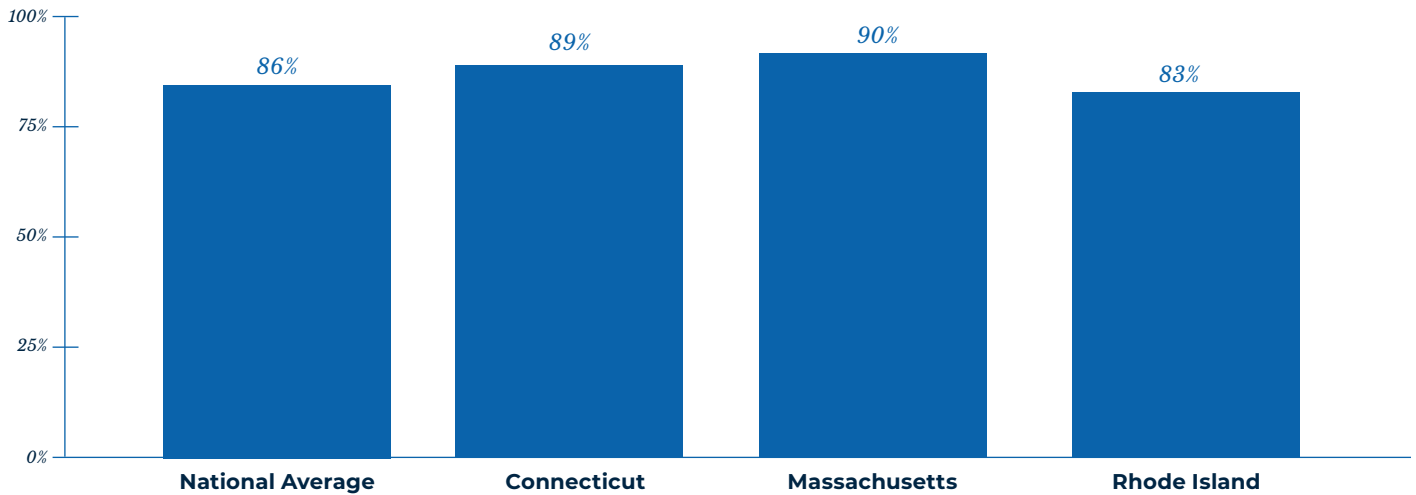
### Rhode Island's 8th-Grade Math NAEP Scores by Percentile



Source: *The Nation's Report Card* (2024)

These academic challenges culminate in a stubbornly low high school graduation rate for the state, with only [84%](#) of 2024 graduates completing their studies within four years, a rate less than one percentage point higher than the most recent national comparison in 2022 and relatively unchanged from a decade ago. A generation of students will be left behind if Rhode Island does not swiftly invest in ways to reverse course on these outcomes.

## Rhode Island's graduation rate is much lower than its peers and the national average



Source: *National Center for Education Statistics (2021-22)*

### Recommendation 1:

#### Enact Changes to the School Funding Formula Recommended by a 2025 Blue Ribbon Commission.

One significant contributor to Rhode Island's lagging student outcomes is the design and distribution of the state's school funding formula. A [2025 Blue Ribbon Commission report](#) acknowledged that the current formula is "insufficient, inequitable, and in need of modernization," with the state only contributing a paltry [38%](#) of K-12 spending. The commission detailed recommendations to update the formula that include more state aid, adjustments to formula weights based on student need, requiring minimum local contributions based on property wealth, and increased transparency of local spending.

While it is [likely](#) that legislation with some of these recommendations will be introduced before the next governor of Rhode Island assumes office, it will be of the utmost importance that the next governor monitor the effects of changes to the formula and pursue additional actions as needed to ensure that funding is sufficient to alter the trajectory of the state's education outcomes. An attentive eye toward the successes and shortcomings of a new school funding formula could prove to be an early win for an administration championing education reform.

## **Recommendation 2:**

### **Monitor implementation of evidence-based literacy reforms and apply evidence-based math reforms to educator preparation programs.**

Given the state’s performance on The Nation’s Report Card, Rhode Island has significant work ahead to improve student proficiency in literacy and math. Fortunately, Rhode Island has [recently pursued](#) the adoption of evidence-based literacy reforms through its landmark [Right to Read Act](#). This and subsequent policy changes to teacher training, professional development, high-quality instructional materials, and other domains are setting Rhode Island on the path to improved literacy rates. The next governor should closely monitor the implementation of these literacy policies to evaluate their efficacy, deepen investments in what is working, and adjust what is not. They should also pay particular attention to the academic progress of [multilingual learners](#)—a population that has nearly doubled in the last decade yet scores far below their peers—and implement [additional targeted interventions](#) for that population as needed.

Rhode Island has made similar strides in evidence-based math instruction, particularly with the 2025 launch of a [Math Matters campaign](#) and a [partnership to integrate personalized, competency-based learning](#) into instruction. However, its approach to math reform is not nearly as robust as with literacy. Rhode Island can [do more](#) to strengthen math instructional standards for teacher preparation programs. Specifically, the state should establish math standards for elementary teacher prep programs that cover all four key math content topics (numbers and operations, algebraic thinking, geometry and measurement, data analysis and probability), include math experts in the review of programs, use math licensure test pass rate data as part of the program review process, and publish the results. These reforms would help the state’s improvements to math instructional practice match the pace of its improvements to reading instructional practice.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Strengthen school improvement requirements and prioritize results.**

With more than 2 in 5 schools receiving [a one- or two-star rating](#) out of five on the state's 2023-24 school performance ratings, Rhode Island should take a much stronger approach to school accountability. The state should introduce more robust reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools, but especially chronically underperforming schools. Legislation and regulations should provide clearer, more stringent guidance aligned with the conditions for entering and exiting various levels of state support or intervention, including required academic performance benchmarks, strict improvement timelines to prevent schools from remaining identified for years without escalation, and potential reforms to leader and teacher contracts to ensure accountability is enforceable and tied to measurable outcomes.

Intervention efforts must also center community voice; lasting improvements in education depend on centering the affected community, so that families who have too often been left out of decision-making can play a meaningful role in shaping the development of a better educational ecosystem.

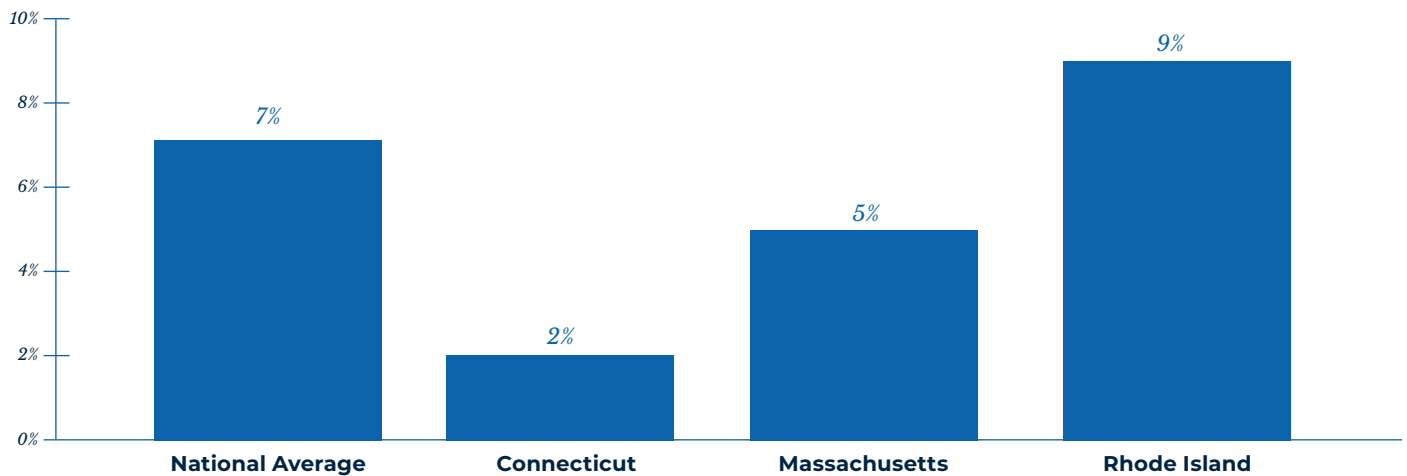
Turnaround laws in states like [Massachusetts](#) and takeover efforts in cities like [New Orleans](#) tend to be more successful when paired with a broader reform agenda including funding reform, state longitudinal data systems that track outcomes beyond high school, and innovative approaches like New Orleans's creation of the nation's most intensive market-based school system. Other states focus on implementation, as [South Carolina](#) does using "transformation coaches." In all of these cases, education authorities focused on evidence-based approaches to school improvement, and Rhode Island would be wise to follow suit.



## Choice

Rhode Island is a champion of public school choice. The state has a [larger charter school student population](#) than neighboring states, and its charter schools outperform traditional district schools by a wider margin than anywhere else in the country. According to [one study](#), students at Rhode Island charter schools gain the equivalent of 90 extra days of learning in English and 88 extra days in math per year. These gains have since [been attributed](#) to state regulatory improvements in opening and evaluating charters.

### Rhode Island leads its peers on charter school enrollment



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics \(2022–2023\)](#)

To continue this momentum, Rhode Island has additional opportunities to further expand the high-quality public education options available for families so that they can choose what works best for their children. There is more the state could do to encourage the proliferation of nontraditional evidence-based school models as well as enrollment within and across districts. Providing easier and wider access to different high-quality options helps to ensure that all children, especially those who are most disadvantaged, can receive an education that meets their needs, sets high expectations for them, and prepares them to succeed in their life after high school.

### Recommendation 1:

#### Deepen investments in nontraditional public school models.

We recommend expanding Rhode Island's financial and regulatory support for charter schools, Community Schools, early college programs, magnet programs, career academies, microschoools, and other nontraditional school models that can accelerate learning outcomes and meet diverse student needs.

## Charter Schools

Despite the [extraordinary performance](#) of Rhode Island charter schools and [steadily growing demand](#), the state severely limits the growth of its charter sector. The primary challenge is the fiscal constraints placed on charter schools, including lower per-pupil funding, unfunded transportation costs, funding holdbacks, and even a [requirement](#) to raise their own facilities funding. These fiscal inequities create a prohibitive barrier to entry and further challenges to expansion for charter operators, even if they outperform their traditional district school counterparts.

The first policy change that should be made to remedy this is the enactment of the charter-related provisions in the [school funding formula recommendations](#) made by the Blue Ribbon Commission. These provisions put the state's charter schools on equal footing with traditional district schools by having funding follow the child regardless of school type. This action alone would resolve many of the challenges that Rhode Island charter schools face in expanding to meet community demand.

In addition, Rhode Island has imposed a [strict cap](#) on charter schools despite their demonstrated impact on student outcomes, denying students access to educational options that can improve their future. Though lifting the 35-charter cap would be the best way to enable the expansion of high-quality charter schools, there is another option that may be more politically palatable: Replacing chronically low-performing district schools with charter schools from "[proven providers](#)" that have a history of success.

To incentivize the growth of high-performing charter schools in the state while intervening in chronically low-performing district schools, the next governor of Rhode Island could consider an approach similar to [Florida](#), which allows vetted charter operators to open high-quality charter schools in the attendance zone of persistently low-performing schools. This model, which has [proven out](#) in other locations around the country, could help Rhode Island expand schools that effectively serve students and phase out those that do not.

## Full-Service Community Schools

[Community Schools](#)—which serve as the center of their neighborhood by providing access to critical programs and services like health care, social services, expanded learning programs, mentoring, adult education, and other resources—have been [shown to](#) improve attendance, reduce disciplinary incidents, boost academic achievement, strengthen school climate, and increase high school graduation rates. They also have a significant ROI, with [studies](#) calculating that **for every \$1 spent on Community Schools, they have a return of up to \$15.**

Rhode Island has already begun investing in these schools in the form of [Child Opportunity Zones](#). However, evidence on the effectiveness of the program is limited. The program should be reviewed to ensure alignment with [current best practices](#) and evaluated for efficacy and the possible ROI of increased investments.

### Dual Enrollment and Early College Programs

Graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and do so faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are **14 percentage points more likely** (68% versus 54%) **to go on to college** compared to control-matched peers, and **14 percentage points more likely** (58% versus 44%) **to persist into a second year of college**—a strong predictor of eventual graduation.

Rhode Island has also invested in this model with [notably positive results](#). The next governor should consider expanding access to early college programs in order to improve the state's college matriculation and persistence rates.

### Microschools

One emerging school type that is expanding across the country is the [microschool model](#). Building on homeschool-style learning pods formed during the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier small-school models, microschools emphasize individualized learning and targeted supports. They can operate either as private or public entities, depending on state context and regulatory structures, but are most commonly private and tuition-based. Because of the nascent nature of the microschool model, data on their performance is currently limited. Several districts across the country are opening and operating microschools to provide more public school options and create opportunities for students to have a different learning experience.

To help address the unique challenges of rural education, Indiana has [begun operating](#) microschools as public charter schools. Board members of the Indiana Microschool Collaborative describe the schools as a way to avoid unnecessary infrastructure investments and better personalize learning to [students' individual needs and interests](#). Similarly, in Washington state, the Issaquah School District has taken a district-led approach, opening microschools [housed within existing school facilities](#) that operate with

distinct schedules, instructional models, and small enrollments while allowing students to participate in courses and activities in the larger school. Together, these examples show how public microschoools can emerge through both charter and district pathways, expanding public school options while remaining integrated within broader public education systems.

Rhode Island's next governor should be strategic and committed to investing in new school models that expand high-quality school options for families and accelerate learning outcomes for students.

## **Recommendation 2: Enact policy mandating within- and cross-district enrollment.**

Zip code should not determine a child's educational outcomes. Yet, that is too often the case when families only have one choice of which public school to send their children. Rhode Island should make it easier for families to choose the public school that works best for their child, no matter where they live. While the state gives districts the option to allow families to enroll their children in another public school within the same district or in another district, it [does not currently mandate](#) that districts do so. This means that families must rely on the discretion of districts to allow them to enroll their children in the schools best suited to their needs. In addition, the [state's laws](#) leave open the possibility of districts creating agreements which [require families to pay](#) for their children's out-of-district tuition. Rhode Island's next governor should work with the legislature to ensure that families have free, unmitigated access to open enrollment options, starting with an analysis of current open enrollment policies' effects on access and equity.

One example of an ambitious inter-district enrollment model that could be adopted with shifts to state policy is in [Connecticut](#). The Greater Hartford system includes nearly 40 magnet schools along with an inter-district transfer program that together serve over 40,000 students in magnets and about 3,000 through open choice. More than half of Hartford's students participate. Families pay nothing for transportation, and enrollment processes are designed to promote socioeconomic diversity. Many of the magnet schools are located in Hartford and New Haven, where large numbers of students of color live, creating new educational opportunities within city neighborhoods while also drawing in suburban students to achieve greater integration. Results indicate positive outcomes for students attending these magnet schools.

### **Recommendation 3:**

**Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC) program to expand access to tutoring and out-of-school time programs.**

The new [Federal Scholarship Tax Credit \(FSTC\) program](#) represents an opportunity to accelerate learning through [high-impact tutoring](#) and expand access to high-quality [out-of-school time](#) programs for students who need them the most. We recommend embracing the FSTC program and designing it to serve under-resourced students and families by providing free services through scholarship-granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and non-academic support to K-12 students. Out-of-school time programming [provides academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities for young people to build academic and durable skills](#). It also provides working class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on the weekends.

## *Moving Forward*

The next governor has a chance to transform education in Rhode Island, from the first day a child enters school to the day they graduate with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to succeed in the world beyond. By embracing innovation that maximizes the potential of every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality public options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future for all. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Rhode Island will thrive for generations to come.