

Rhode Island

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In 2010, the Rhode Island State Legislature restructured the public-school funding formula. This reform created a funding formula that would allow “disproportion in funding for local education agencies (LEAs)”¹ in which per-pupil funding allocation could be differentiated. In 2016, some adjustments were made to the funding formula, “based on the principle that the money follows the student.”² In 2020, a report titled “Special Legislative Task Force to Study Rhode Island’s Education Funding Formula” was released, which outlined the recommendations after analyzing data, meeting with education stakeholders, and reviewing school district data related to finance and outcomes. Most notable among the 15 recommendations are (a) more broadly publishing state budget processes, (b) expanding funding for English language learners (ELLs), (c) increasing transportation funding (especially for children and youth in foster programs), (d) establishing a reserve fund for enrollment growth, (e) fully funding special education services, and (f) requiring the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to review the funding weight categories for students who experience poverty and those with special education needs.³ These recommendations and the continued COVID-19 global pandemic have impacted the state of Rhode Island education funding.

FUNDING PRIORITIES FOR P-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) described their role, “...to ensure that all Rhode Island Students are ready for success in college, careers, and life.”⁴ To this end, Rhode Island enacted just over \$1.034 billion in P-12 education during FY 2021. This is a reduction from the previous fiscal year with \$1.047 billion enacted. RIDE has a history of funding priorities that include early childhood education, school resource officer

1. Janelle Grant, Rhode Island, (2020) at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/752007>

2. Rhode Island Funding Formula Reference Guide, at https://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Funding-and-Finance-Wise-Investments/Funding-Sources/State-Education-Aid-Funding-Formula/Guide%20with%20flow%20charts%204.13.2018_updated%205.13.2019.pdf?ver=2021-02-09-140058-350

3. Special Legislative Task Force to Study Rhode Island’s Education Funding Formula: Findings and Recommendations, (2020), at <http://www.rilegislature.gov/Reports/Funding%20Formula%20TF%20full%20report.pdf>

4. Rhode Island Office of Management and Budget, at <http://www.omb.ri.gov/budget/prioryear/operating/2020.php>

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programs, and afterschool and extended day programs⁵.

In the recent release of the Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for PK-12 Education, 2021-2025,⁶ RIDE identified five priorities: 1) Equity, 2) Excellence in learning, 3) Engaged communities, 4) World class talent, and 5) Governance Structures.⁷ Each of the priorities have commitment statements and measurable goals. While these may be noteworthy and all have implications to how education is funded and budgeted, the priorities that may be most significant for education finance include "advocat[ing] for a funding formula that distributes resources equitably," providing "high-quality curriculum materials" and resources, ensuring that schools have the digital tools and resources available to "maintain 21st century learning environments," developing "highly-skilled and diverse" teacher and leader pipelines, and equipping "school leaders with the information and resources" in order to make data-driven decisions and build the supports that students need. These specific priorities were included because of the financial resources needed to realize these priorities.

CHANGES TO FUNDING FORMULA FOR P-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION

There were no changes to the education funding formula.

PRESSING STATE ISSUES AFFECTING P-12 EDUCATION FUNDING

A significant increase of federal funding was enacted in Rhode Island during FY 2021 due to COVID-19 and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). The total ESSER allocation was over \$415 million. These federal funds were allocated based on Rhode Island's plan and priorities to 1) return to in-person learning, 2) securely reopen schools and sustain safe operations, 3) support the students who were impacted the most by the pandemic, 4) attend to the academic impact, 5) invest in learning outside the regular school year, 6) expand the 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool programming, and 7) support the mental health needs of staff and students.

RIDE reported 66 public LEAs or districts in Rhode Island.⁸ These included 32 regular school districts, four regional school districts, four state operated schools, one regional collaborative LEA, and 22 charter schools. The state operated schools for which RIDE also provided funding included the William M.

5. Jacob D. Skousen, Rhode Island (2020) at <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/article/786688>

6. Together Through Opportunity: Pathways to Student Success, Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for PK-12 Education, 2021-2015, (2021) at https://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Inside-RIDE/Commissioner/RIDEStrategicPlan_2021-2025.pdf?ver=2021-04-22-145533-767

7. Id.

8. <https://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/RIPublicSchools/SchoolDistricts.aspx>

Davies Career & Technical School (a career and technical high school education program), the Rhode Island School for the Deaf (a public school designed to make education “accessible to the Deaf and hard of hearing children of Rhode Island”), and the Metropolitan Career & Technical School (a state operated high school that is “designed to provide and integrated academic and vocational curriculum tailored to the needs of individual students statewide”⁹.)

A key trend in the alternatives for traditional public schools is the growth in charter schools. While there is one less charter school in Rhode Island than from previous years, the number of charter schools has remained at nearly the same since 2013.¹⁰ The growth in charter schools has been in the student enrollment. Over a decade, 2011 to 2021, charter school enrollment grew 170%, from 3,920 to 10,585 students.¹¹ These increases have occurred annually and have followed a consistent pattern of growth. The charter school enrollment growth in Rhode Island has implications to school funding that follows a similar pattern that has occurred in other states, “charter public schools can negatively impact the financial position of traditional public schools.”¹² An example of this impact can be found in the transportation of students. Rhode Island charter schools are not required to have their own transportation systems, instead “the sending district is required to provide transportation to charter school students.”¹³ Additionally, in FY 2021, 7.4% students were enrolled in charter schools, yet only 1.4% “of the high-cost special education students in the state were enrolled in charter public schools that same year.”¹⁴

Average P-12 Per-pupil expenditure: FY 2021, \$16,121¹⁵

Allocation of State dollars and percent of the State Budget for P-12 and HE:

P-12: FY 2021, \$1,034,714,691¹⁶

HE: FY 2021, \$138,600,000¹⁷

9. Id

10. An Analysis of Charter Public Schools in Rhode Island, at https://ripec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021_Charter_Public_Schools.pdf

11. Id

12. David Arsen and Yongmei Ni, “The Effects of Charter School Competition on District Resource Allocation,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* vol 48, no. 1 (2012): 3-38; Robert Bifulco and Randall Reback, “Fiscal Impacts of Charter Schools: Lessons from New York,” *Education Finance and Policy* vol. 9, no 1 (2014): 86-107; Jason B. Cook, “The effect of charter competition on unionized district revenues and resource allocation,” *Journal of Public Economics* vol. 158 (2018): 48-62.

13. Id

14. Id

15. Rhode Island Department of Education Statistical Reports, at <https://www.eride.ri.gov/reports/default.asp>

16. Id.

17. Id.