



RIPEC Policy Brief

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Rhode Island's Multilingual Learners: Funding Challenges for a Rapidly Growing K-12 Student Population

Introduction

In Rhode Island and throughout the United States, public elementary and secondary education is one of government's most important functions. It is not only vital to the wellbeing and future of children and their families, but it is also essential to our economy and democratic institutions. Because of this, state and local governments make a large investment in elementary and secondary education; in Rhode Island, over one-quarter of state general revenues and more than half of local dollars are committed to K-12 education.¹ Most local governments take on the primary responsibility for funding schools and schools are principally administered at the local level, but the Rhode Island General Assembly has the ultimate authority over the provision of public education under the state constitution and over a third of public school funding comes from the state.²

State education aid in Rhode Island is important to providing adequate and equitable funding. The local share of education costs is funded primarily by property tax revenues in the Ocean State. However, several Rhode Island communities have property wealth much lower than the state overall and dramatically lower than some communities.³ Many of these municipalities with the least ability to raise property tax revenues for education also have much higher concentrations of economically disadvantaged and multilingual students, who require greater educational resources.⁴ Consequently, these communities rely heavily on state funding to provide an adequate education for their students.

One of the state's most pressing K-12 education issues is funding for multilingual learners (MLL), a rapidly growing student population in Rhode Island which now represents 12.5 percent of all

¹ In the state's FY 2024 budget, 27.6 percent of general revenue spending is dedicated to elementary and secondary education. R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, [2023-5200, Substitute A as Recommended by the House Finance Committee](#), June 2023. In FY 2019, 60.1 percent of municipal expenditures were attributable to education expenditures. RIPEC, "[An Introduction to Municipal Finance in Rhode Island](#)," April 2021.

² RIPEC, "[Rhode Island's Education Funding Formula Revised](#)," July 2023.

³ RIPEC has previously found wide discrepancies in per capita taxable property value across Rhode Island cities and towns, ranging from approximately \$26,000 in Central Falls to over \$250,000 in seven communities in FY 2019. Other communities with low property wealth per capita include Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Providence, and West Warwick. RIPEC, "[A System Out of Balance: Property Taxation Across Rhode Island](#)," January 2022.

⁴ RIPEC showed the stark concentration of economically disadvantaged students and multilingual learners in a report published last year. RIPEC, "[Improving Rhode Island's K-12 Schools: Where Do We Go From Here?](#)," October 2022.

students.⁵ This rapid growth is happening in the context of declining student enrollments across the state. Moreover, Rhode Island’s population of multilingual learners is heavily concentrated, with over 90.0 percent of all multilingual learners attending schools in only ten districts, with Providence alone accounting for roughly half (50.6 percent) of the state’s multilingual learners. In 2023, Central Falls became the state’s first district with more than half of its students classified as multilingual learners.

Research has shown that multilingual learners require additional resources to meet their educational needs. Over the last 20 years, pedagogy related to multilingual learners has changed from teaching basic, conversational English to developing a student’s ability to participate in content area instruction. This shift requires adjusting existing curricula to meet the needs of multilingual learners, and providing additional resources for professional development, as well as increased time and staffing to provide extra instruction or alternative programs for multilingual learners.⁶

First implemented in fiscal year (FY) 2017 and haltingly increased through FY 2023, state funding for multilingual learners in Rhode Island has been consistently behind the curve. While funding was increased significantly in FY 2024, Rhode Island still lags the nation when it comes to state spending on multilingual learners. Local school districts also have been slow to respond with funding for this growing population of students. There remain wide variations among districts in terms of funding for multilingual learners on a per pupil basis, with the lowest-spending districts having the most multilingual learners and the worst overall student outcomes. Recognizing the need for funding solutions, the 2023 General Assembly directed the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to explore means to provide additional aid to multilingual learners.⁷

This policy brief focuses its analysis of state education aid for multilingual learners on Rhode Island’s traditional school districts—and not its charter or state schools—given that the vast majority of multilingual learners attend a district school and state funds for multilingual learners are primarily invested in districts.⁸ The brief provides a demographic overview, a discussion of student outcomes, and a review of federal, state, and local funding for multilingual learners. Based on its analysis, RIPEC offers recommendations to policymakers. This brief builds upon recent comprehensive reports by RIPEC on K-12 education reform and funding.⁹

⁵ The growth of multilingual learners is not confined to Rhode Island; numbers have grown substantially across the nation over the last ten years. Ileana Najarro, “[The Growth of Hispanic Students and Nationwide – in Charts](#),” Education Week, January 30, 2023.

⁶ Julie Sugarman, “[Funding English Learner Education: Making the Most of Policy and Budget Levers](#),” National Center on Immigration Integration Policy, March 2021; Sonya Douglass Hortsford and Carrie Sampson, “[High-ELL Growth States: Expanding Funding Equity and Opportunity for English Language Learners](#),” Voices in Urban Education, Summer 2013; Maria Milard, “[State funding mechanisms for English language learners](#),” January 2015.

⁷ R.I. Gen. Assembly, [Article 8: Related to Education](#).

⁸ Charter and state schools had 2,847 multilingual learners (19.0 percent of all students enrolled in charter or state schools) in 2023 and received \$2.7 million (15.9 percent) out of the total state allocation for multilingual learners in FY 2024. R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, [Education Aid: FY 2024](#).

⁹ RIPEC, “[Rhode Island’s Funding Formula After Ten Years: Education Finance in the Ocean State](#),” April 2022; “[Improving Rhode Island’s K-12 Schools: Where Do We Go From Here](#),” October 2022; “[Rhode Island’s Funding Formula Revised](#),” July 2023.

Multilingual Learner Identification and Demographic Overview

Rhode Island identifies multilingual learners through a regulated process that begins with a home-based survey administered by local education agencies (LEAs), which include traditional school districts, charter public schools, and state schools. If the student's native language is determined to be one other than English, a background interview with the parents is conducted, and the student is given an initial screening assessment to determine their level of English proficiency. This process is used to determine the student's initial placement in multilingual learner programs.¹⁰ After this determination, LEAs are required to annually administer the Assessing Comprehension and Communications in English State-to-State (ACCESS) assessment to all identified multilingual learners.¹¹ The test is administered in January and February and measures the English language proficiency of multilingual learners in four areas: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Each student receives a total assessment score that places the student in one of six categories based on their level of English proficiency: Entering, Beginning, Developing, Expanding, Bridging, or Reaching. Students who score in the first three categories are classified as eligible for the most intensive programs.¹² Intensive programs require three periods of extra English as a second language per day for Entering and Beginning students and two periods of such instruction per day for Developing students.¹³

Based on ACCESS assessment scores, the multilingual learner student population has increased significantly in Rhode Island since 2015.¹⁴ As depicted in Figure 1, from 2015 to 2023 the number of multilingual learners in district schools increased from 9,372 to 15,260 students (62.8 percent). Those in the most intensive programs grew from 6,088 to 12,603 students (107.0 percent) during the same period. In 2023, multilingual learners made up 12.5 percent of all students in traditional districts, up from 7.2 percent in 2015.¹⁵

¹⁰ For more information on Rhode Island's regulations regarding the initial and continuing placement and evaluation of students in multilingual learner programs see, RIDE, [Multilingual Learners](#).

¹¹ ACCESS was developed by, and is managed as part of, the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) project housed at the University of Wisconsin. WIDA provides tools to assist states with their multilingual learners. For more information see [WIDA](#), University of Wisconsin.

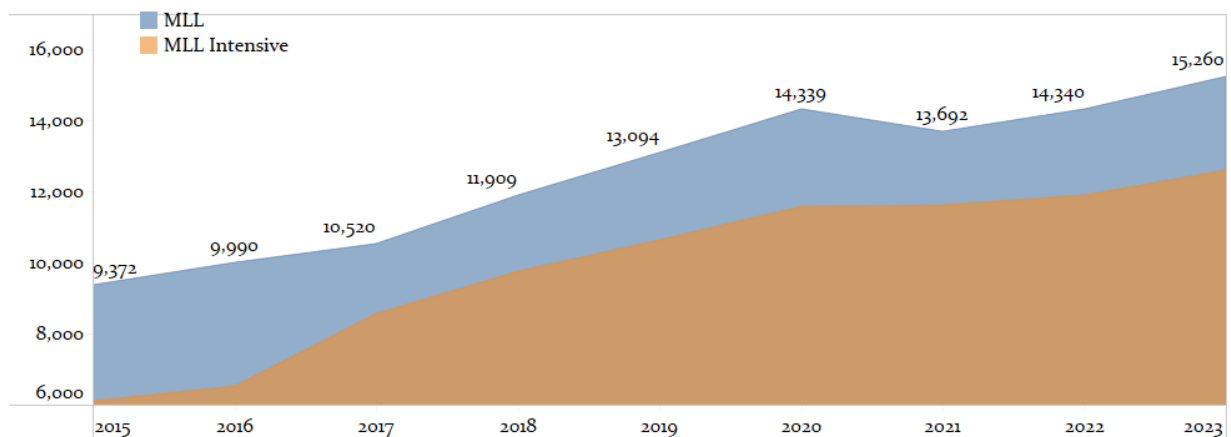
¹² RIDE, [Rhode Island Regulations and Guidance for English Language Learners](#). The six categories are coded number 1 through 6 and correspond with a student's level of English language proficiency. Those classified as Entering (coded as a 1), Beginning (2), and Developing (3) are included in the most intensive programs and eligible for funding from the state. The remaining students are coded as Expanding (4), Bridging (5), or Reaching (6). These students are considered multilingual learners but are not eligible for additional funding from the state.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ RIPEC uses 2015 as a starting date because it is the first reference year for state funding that began in FY 2017. R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, [Education Aid: FY 2017](#).

¹⁵ Student enrollment received from RIDE. Calculations by RIPEC.

Figure 1
Multilingual Learners in Traditional Districts
2015-2023



Source: RIDE data.

Spanish is by far the most prevalent home language of multilingual learners in Rhode Island; four in five (80.1 percent) multilingual learners spoke Spanish at home in the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent year for which data are available. The next most prevalent languages include Creole and Pidgin (4.2 percent), Portuguese (2.6 percent), Arabic (1.3 percent), and Chinese (1.0 percent). Overall, RIDE identified 142 different home languages spoken by multilingual learners in the state in the 2021-2022 school year.¹⁶

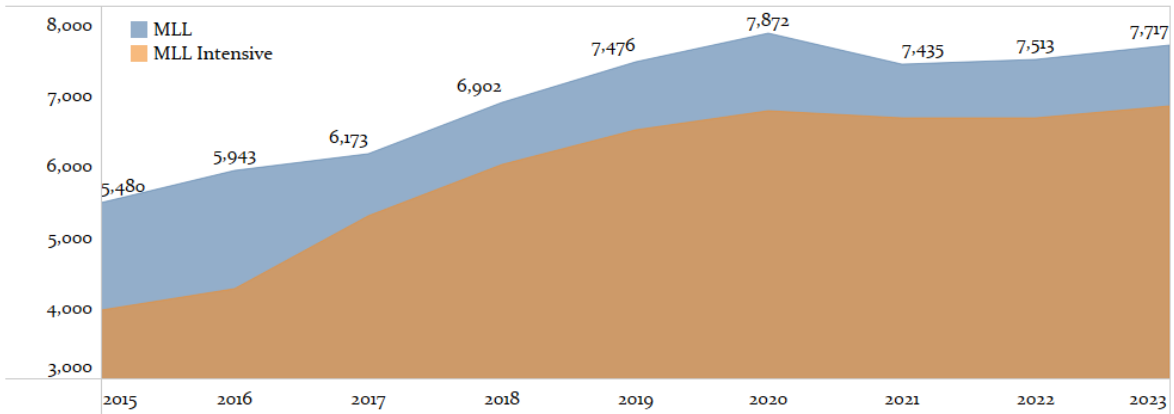
The rapid growth in the number of multilingual learners in Rhode Island takes place in the larger context of declining student enrollment. Since 2011, traditional districts have experienced declining enrollment, with charter school enrollment absorbing some of those losses. Since 2020, student enrollment in Rhode Island has declined year over year, with all LEAs losing 5,662 students (4.0 percent) and traditional districts losing 8,225 students (6.3 percent) through 2023.¹⁷

While multilingual learners make up a growing percentage of Rhode Island students, they are highly concentrated in a small number of districts. Detailed in Figure 2, from 2015 to 2023, Providence’s population of multilingual learners grew from 5,480 to 7,717 (40.8 percent). Multilingual learners now make up a full 39.3 percent of all students in the Providence school district and represent about half (50.6 percent) of all multilingual learners statewide. As shown in Figure 3, over this same period, the population of multilingual learners in Central Falls grew from 683 to 1,276 students (86.8 percent). In 2015, multilingual learners constituted about one-quarter (26.5 percent) of that district’s student body; in 2023, Central Falls became the state’s first—and currently only—district with a majority of its student population classified as multilingual learners.

¹⁶ RIDE, [Multilingual Learners Public Summary: All Home Languages \(2021-22\)](#).

¹⁷ Calculations by RIPEC. Student population in all LEAs had remained relatively stable since 2011, while traditional districts saw declining or stable populations in the same period.

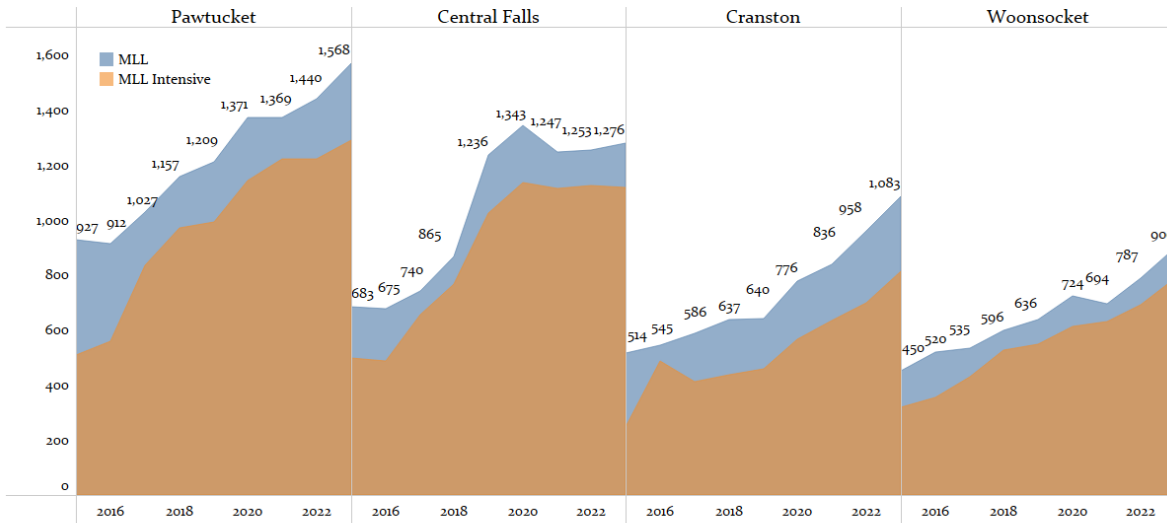
Figure 2
Multilingual Learners in Providence
2015-2023



Source: RIDE data

Rapid growth in the number of multilingual learners is not only confined to Providence and Central Falls. Figure 3 shows that, since 2015, Pawtucket’s population of multilingual learners has increased by 69.2 percent to 1,568, second only to Providence in terms of total number of students. Cranston’s multilingual learner population has more than doubled (to 1,083 students) since 2015, while Woonsocket’s has also doubled in the last eight years (to 900 students).

Figure 3
Multilingual Learners in Select Districts
2015-2023

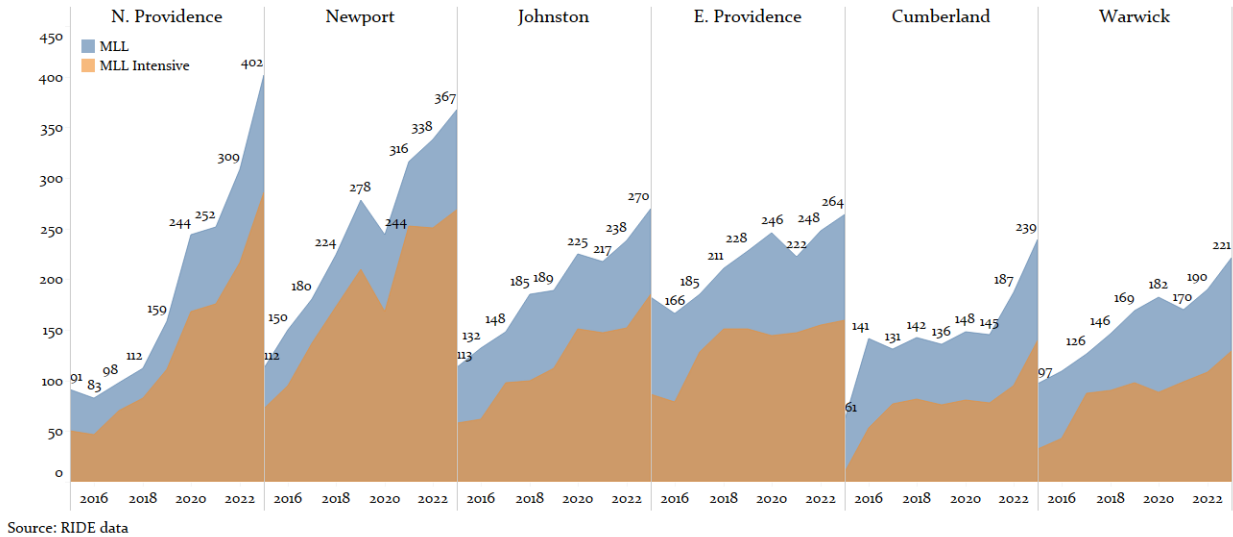


Source: RIDE data

As shown in Figure 4, other districts have seen fast growth in the number of multilingual learners since 2015, including Cumberland, East Providence, Johnston, Newport, North Providence, and Warwick. Collectively, they saw their numbers nearly triple, from 656 to 1,763 between 2015 and 2023,

and these districts now make-up 11.6 percent of all multilingual learners in the state. North Providence alone has seen multilingual learner enrollment rise from 91 to 402 students—an eight-year increase of 341.8 percent.

Figure 4
Multilingual Learners in Select Districts
2015-2023



For a figure detailing the change in the number of multilingual learners for all school districts, see the Appendix of this brief.

Student Outcomes

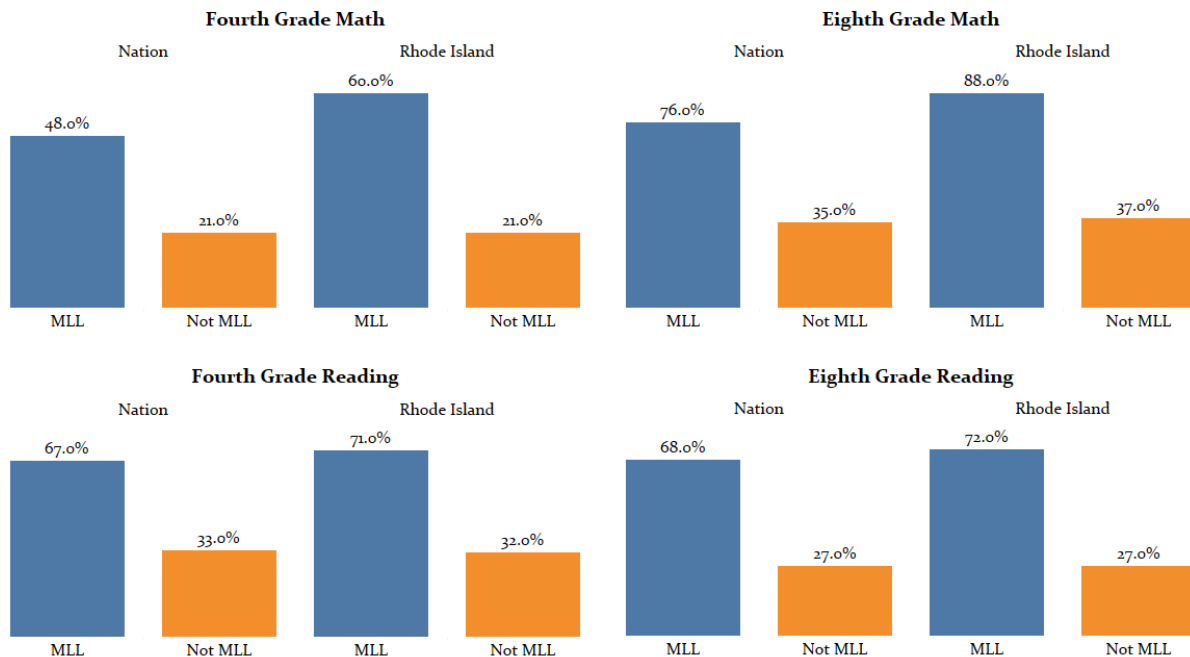
The only required standardized assessment taken by students across the country, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, is the only assessment of student achievement that enables interstate comparison. NAEP’s data on multilingual learners in Rhode Island is limited, but the assessments administered to fourth and eighth graders measuring math and reading proficiency, provide some evidence that multilingual learners in Rhode Island have worse educational outcomes than multilingual learners in the nation overall.¹⁸

As depicted in Figure 5, 60.0 percent of Rhode Island’s fourth grade, multilingual learners were below basic proficiency in math in 2022 and 71.0 percent were below basic proficiency in reading. The data demonstrate with statistical significance that Rhode Island’s fourth grade multilingual learners trail the nation by 12.0 percentage points in math. This deficiency is noteworthy given that the below basic rates for Rhode Island’s fourth grade, non-multilingual students are on par with those of the nation. The achievement gap for eighth grade multilingual learners is similar; Rhode Island’s

¹⁸ NAEP is an annual, nationally representative assessment given in several subject areas to fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students. Students are scored in one of four categories in each subject area: below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced. It is nationally administered every three years in math and reading for fourth and eighth graders, which makes up the Nation’s Report Card. For more information see, NAEP, [“About NAEP: A Common Measure of Student Achievement.”](#)

multilingual learners trailed the rates of multilingual learners in the U.S. by 12.0 percentage points in math, while outcomes for non-multilingual learners are statistically similar to the nation. For both fourth and eighth grade multilingual learners, the NAEP shows a 4.0 percentage point gap in reading between Rhode Island and the U.S., but there is not enough data to draw a statistically significant comparison.

Figure 5
Nation's Report Card Below Basic Proficiency
2022



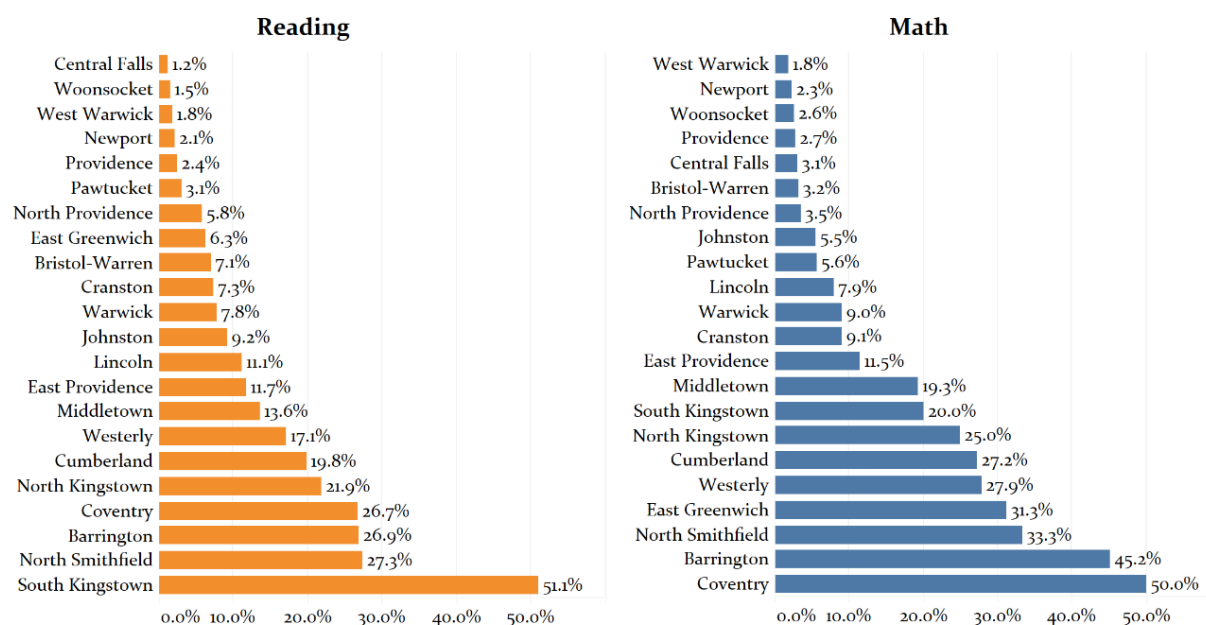
Source: The Nation's Report Card

Rhode Island's most recent state assessments similarly show that multilingual learners are failing to meet or exceed expectations in math or reading in alarming numbers.¹⁹ Results are particularly troubling in districts with the largest proportions of students in poverty, many of which also have the largest numbers of multilingual learners. As Figure 6 shows, the proportion of multilingual learners meeting or exceeding expectations in reading and math in Central Falls, Providence, Newport, West Warwick, and Woonsocket are extremely low. In contrast, multilingual learners achieve relatively high levels of proficiency in districts that have small populations of multilingual learners.²⁰

¹⁹ RIDE, [School and District Report Cards: 2021-2022 State Assessments](#). State assessments include the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (grades 3-8), SAT (grade 11), Next Generation of Science Assessments (grades 5, 8, 11), and Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessments (grades 3-8, 11). Students are ranked as either not meeting expectations (1), partially meeting expectations (2), meeting expectations (3), or exceeding expectations (4).

²⁰ For example, Coventry (26 MLL) ranks first in math proficiency and fourth in reading proficiency for multilingual learners statewide, North Smithfield (25 MLL) is third in math and second in reading, and Barrington (85 MLL) is second in math and third in reading. None of the top five districts in multilingual learner math or reading scores have more than 85 multilingual learners. Ibid. RIPEC calculations.

Figure 6
Multilingual Learners Who Meet/Exceed Expectations
2021-2022



Source: RIDE Report Cards

Funding in Rhode Island

Funding for multilingual learners in Rhode Island comes from local, state, and federal sources. Federal funding was established under Titles I and III of the No Child Left Behind Act and is now administered through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), enacted in 2017. State funding is provided through a categorical allocation based on a formula, while local funding is provided by the local district. This section of the brief will outline those funding sources, highlighting some issues as to how state funding is allocated and the variation in multilingual learner spending among districts.

Federal Funding

Rhode Island receives federal money that is used to assist multilingual learners in two tranches: Title I, Parts A and C, and Title III of ESSA. Title I, Part A provides money for school districts with significant educational achievement gaps with the goal of assisting disadvantaged students by improving programs administered by LEAs. Title I funds can be used for additional instruction time, additional teachers or aides, after-school or summer programs, or supplemental instruction methods. Title I, Part C funds are specifically intended to close achievement gaps and provide educational assistance to migratory children. Title I is a grant program, with money allocated based on the number of children in poverty and is subject to a host of regulations for how money is to be

distributed and allocated.²¹ Rhode Island received a total of \$52.5 million for all LEAs and \$45.8 million for traditional districts in Title I funds in FY 2023.²²

Title III money is earmarked specifically to assist students learning English and is distributed to states based on the numbers of multilingual learners and immigrant children in the state. Compared to Title I funding, Title III aid represents a relatively small amount. Rhode Island received \$2.3 million for all LEAs and \$2.0 million for traditional districts in Title III funding in FY 2023.²³ Title III funds, like Title I funds, are allocated through a grant process through which the funds must be used for purposes of providing additional educational resources to multilingual learners. These purposes might include developing new language instructional education programs, restructuring or reforming existing programs, providing professional development, purchasing educational technology, or designing community-oriented programs, among other activities that might assist multilingual learners.²⁴ Figure 7 depicts a district-by-district breakdown of Title III funds for FY 2023. Providence received \$1.0 million, more than half of all Title III funds allocated to Rhode Island districts.

State Funding

Since FY 2017, Rhode Island has provided state funding for multilingual learners through a categorical fund that reimburses LEAs for a proportion of the per-pupil core instructional amount for multilingual learners in the most intensive programs. Students are eligible for funding if identified in the first three categories on the ACCESS annual proficiency assessment (Entering, Beginning, or Developing). For FY 2024, the amount of aid is determined by the number of those students in

Figure 7
Title III: Limited English Proficient Allocation for Multilingual Learners, FY 2023

Barrington	\$	10,445
Bristol-Warren	\$	8,972
Burrillville	\$	1,473
Central Falls	\$	168,862
Chariho	\$	2,009
Coventry	\$	3,616
Cranston	\$	134,982
Cumberland	\$	26,380
East Greenwich	\$	3,482
East Providence	\$	34,281
Exeter-West Greenwich	\$	1,741
Foster	\$	-
Foster-Glocester	\$	-
Glocester	\$	-
Jamestown	\$	268
Johnston	\$	33,344
Lincoln	\$	8,704
Little Compton	\$	-
Middletown	\$	27,184
Narragansett	\$	803
New Shoreham	\$	2,410
Newport	\$	46,735
North Kingstown	\$	11,918
North Providence	\$	43,655
North Smithfield	\$	2,678
Pawtucket	\$	201,001
Portsmouth	\$	2,678
Providence	\$	1,033,657
Scituate	\$	134
Smithfield	\$	3,080
South Kingstown	\$	5,490
Tiverton	\$	937
Warwick	\$	28,657
West Warwick	\$	14,061
Westerly	\$	9,776
Woonsocket	\$	108,334
District Total	\$	1,981,747

Source: RIDE data

²¹ For more information on the regulations involved in the distribution and allocation of Title I funds, see U.S. Department of Education, [Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged](#).

²² U.S. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, [ESSA Title I, Part A: Funding Status and Awards](#).

²³ U.S. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, [ESSA TITLE III: Funding Status and Awards](#).

²⁴ For a complete list of the relevant programs that are allowed under Title III, see. [U.S. Department of Education, Title III: Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students](#).

the first three ACCESS categories, multiplied by 15.0 percent of the core instructional amount, multiplied by the LEA's state share ratio.²⁵

Due to the timing of the budget process and the ACCESS test, the reference year for multilingual learner student counts is from two years prior to the funding year; funding for multilingual learners in FY 2024 was based on student counts as of June 30, 2022, although WIDA makes the data available about two months prior to this date.²⁶ To receive funds, each LEA must provide to RIDE a set of assurances and a detailed spending plan if their allocation exceeds \$10,000. LEAs are also required to use these funds for high-quality research-based services.²⁷

The reference year provision for funding multilingual learners results in an undercounting of multilingual learners due to the rapid growth in the number of this student population year over year. The FY 2024 budget allocates funding based on a student count of 11,940 as of June 30, 2022, but a more accurate count based as of June 30, 2023, is 12,689, a difference of 749. Using the more recent student counts would have resulted in \$0.9 million in additional funding for districts for FY 2024.²⁸

From FY 2017 until FY 2023, categorical funding for high-cost multilingual learners was based on ten percent of the state share of the per pupil core instructional amount but was also subject to appropriation. In other words, funds were reduced proportionally if the costs associated with the number of qualifying multilingual learners exceeded the funds appropriated by the General Assembly. For each of the years during this period, the funding appropriated by the Assembly was far less than the amount required to fully fund the ten percent share.²⁹ For example, in FY 2023 the percentage of the core instructional amount funded by the appropriation was only 4.4 percent.³⁰

In addition, under the state's grant reimbursement model, some of the funding for multilingual learners appropriated and allocated by the General Assembly has been left unspent. From FY 2019 to FY 2023, a total of \$23.0 million for multilingual learners was appropriated, of which \$1.2 million (5.2 percent) remained unspent.³¹

For the FY 2024 budget, the Assembly made two major changes to funding multilingual learners: the formula factor was increased to 15.0 percent of the per pupil core instructional amount and the funding is no longer subject to appropriation. These changes resulted in a large increase in

²⁵ The funding formula for education in Rhode Island includes a core instructional amount (\$11,876 per student in FY 2024), a student success factor of 40.0 percent of the core instructional amount for students in poverty (\$4,750 in FY 2024), and a state share ratio, which determines the proportion of the core instructional amount and student success factor to be covered by the state through the formula. RIDE, [Funding Formula Reference Guide](#).

²⁶ Results for the ACCESS test for FY 2025 will be made available on April 29, 2024. WIDA, [Rhode Island: Assessment Testing Dates](#).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Providence (\$250,000), Woonsocket (\$160,000), Cranston (\$110,000), and Pawtucket (\$100,000) would particularly stand to benefit from a more recent student count. Calculations by RIPEC.

²⁹ Without the subject to appropriation language, ten percent of the state share of the core instructional amount would have provided an additional \$5.8 million in FY 2023 and an additional \$5.2 million in FY 2022. Calculations by RIPEC.

³⁰ Calculations by RIPEC.

³¹ Data received from RIDE.

categorical funding, with \$16.8 million allocated to districts in FY 2024 (\$1,169 per pupil), up from \$4.5 million (\$307 per pupil) in FY 2023.³² While constituting a large jump in funding, this allocation for FY 2024 represents less than two percent of the total \$1.0 billion in state formula and categorical aid allocated to school districts for education in FY 2024.³³ Figure 8 depicts the amount allocated to multilingual learners from FY 2017 to FY 2024 and the per pupil amounts associated with the allocation for each year.

Figure 8
State Funding to Districts for MLL
FY 2017 - FY 2024

FY	State Allocation	\$ Per MLL
2017	\$ 2,242,422	\$ 225
2018	\$ 2,278,654	\$ 217
2019	\$ 2,465,586	\$ 207
2020	\$ 4,567,903	\$ 349
2021	\$ 4,571,801	\$ 319
2022	\$ 4,564,031	\$ 333
2023	\$ 4,406,553	\$ 307
2024	\$ 16,771,714	\$ 1,169

Note: \$ Per MLL includes all students scoring 1-6 on the ACCESS test
Source: R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff Budget as Enacted; RIPEC calculations

Local Spending

Local government spending on multilingual learners in Rhode Island is difficult to ascertain on a district-by-district basis. School districts are required to submit their budgets to RIDE, but many districts fail to do so in a timely manner.³⁴ There is a category for expenses for multilingual learners in the Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA)—RIDE’s system for reporting district- and school-level expenditures—but this number reflects federal, state, and local funding for those students rather than just the local share.³⁵ Also, wide variations in spending among districts calls into question the consistency and accuracy of the accounting of these expenditures. Based on the data that is available, there are large spending differences among districts. As depicted in Figure 9, FY 2023 per pupil district spending for multilingual learners ranged from a high of \$12,244 in South Kingstown to a low of \$2,554 in Cranston.³⁶

³² These numbers are \$19.4 million and \$5.0 million including charter and state schools, respectively. R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, “[Budget as Enacted: FY 2024](#).”

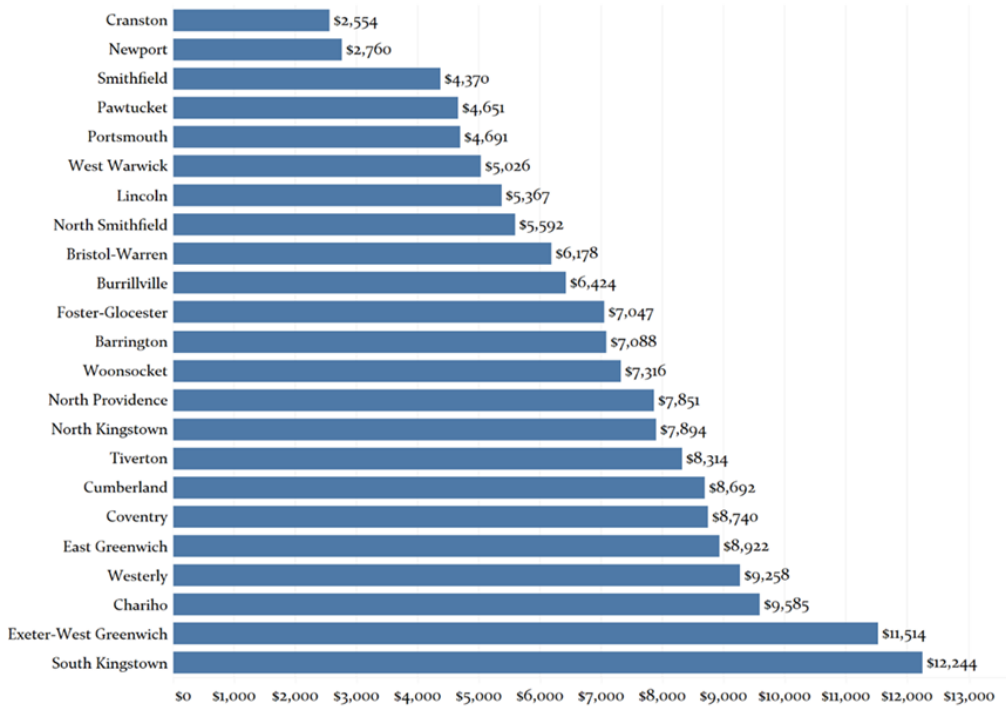
³³ R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff, “[Education Aid: FY 2024](#).”

³⁴ For example, Providence and Central Falls’s local budgets are not available for FY 2023, Central Falls’s FY 2024 budget does not include federal funds. These districts have the first and third largest multilingual student populations in the state.

³⁵ UCOA is RIDE’s method of accounting for financial data for all LEAs. The goal is to provide transparency as well as a means through which state and local officials may make direct intrastate comparisons in the interest of improving student performance. For more information see RIDE, [Uniform Chart of Accounts](#).

³⁶ District spending data comes from RIDE, [Uniform Chart of Accounts: LEA Budgets FY 2023](#). Multilingual learner enrollment received from RIDE. Calculations by RIPEC. FY 2023 represents the most complete, recent data available.

Figure 9
Multilingual Learner Spending Per Pupil
FY 2023



Source: RIDE, LEA Local Budgets

Notably, the districts with the most multilingual learners and with the worst outcomes for those students, are among those districts that report spending the least per multilingual learner. Of the 23 districts reporting data, Cranston and Pawtucket are two of the four lowest spending districts on multilingual learners, while having the second and fourth most multilingual learners in the state, respectively. These districts also have some of the poorest student outcomes for multilingual learners. Of the 22 districts for which RIDE has reported student outcomes for multilingual learners, Cranston ranks 16th highest in reading and 13th highest in math, while Pawtucket ranks 17th highest in both reading and math.³⁷

Funding Across States

Comparing funding for multilingual learners across different states presents a challenge. While all states use a funding formula, the components of those formulas vary widely. For example, states utilize different base per pupil amounts and have differing requirements for the state/local share of funding. States also may provide different levels of funding based on metrics like poverty, special education, grade level, career and technical education offerings, or multilingual learners. States also may provide differing levels of funding based on the density or sparsity of these conditions in a given student population. Finally, these funding approaches operate in the context of states that vary widely in terms of their demographics, resources, and culture.

³⁷ RIDE, [School and District Report Cards: 2021-2022 State Assessments](#). Data were not released for the remaining districts because the reporting size did not meet the minimum necessary to ensure confidentiality (10). Calculations by RIPEC.

All but ten states use a state funding formula that begin with a base pupil amount, and of those, 31 states and Washington D.C. provide an additional allocation for multilingual learners based on a percentage of that base per pupil amount. Six of these states also provide additional money to multilingual learners for after-school programs, density, or increased need through categorical funds or grants.³⁸

Despite the differences in base per pupil amounts, these percentages provide a comparative value of additional funding dedicated to multilingual learners. Based on a survey of available data, Rhode Island’s funding approach for multilingual learners is relatively ungenerous as compared to other states. As shown in Figure 10, of the 31 states and Washington D.C. that provide multilingual learner funding through a multiplier or factor of the base per pupil amount, Rhode Island, with a multiplier of 15.0 percent, has the 28th highest (fifth lowest) factor.

Rhode Island’s factor weight is also well behind the mean factor weight of 41.0 percent for all states and behind neighboring Connecticut’s factor weight of 25.0 percent. Massachusetts provides a share of a flat amount based on grade level: \$2,537 for elementary school, \$2,721 for middle school, and \$3,265 for high school. These flat amounts are respectively equivalent to a factor of 29.3 percent, 32.6 percent, and 32.7 percent of the state’s core instructional amount. For comparative purposes, Rhode Island’s 15.0 percent bonus weight provides an equivalent flat amount of \$1,781 per multilingual learner, while Connecticut’s 25.0 percent bonus weight provides \$2,881 per multilingual learner.³⁹

Figure 10
Ranking of States that Use a Multiplier to Fund MLL

Rank	State	% of Core Instructional Amount
1	Maryland	200.0%
2	Georgia	158.8%
3	New York	150.0%
4	Missouri	60.0%
5	Pennsylvania	60.0%
6	Maine	57.5%
7	New Jersey	50.0%
8	New Mexico	50.0%
9	Oregon	50.0%
10	D.C.	49.0%
11	Kansas	29.0%
12	Connecticut	25.0%
13	Nebraska	25.0%
14	Nevada	25.0%
15	North Dakota	25.0%
16	Oklahoma	25.0%
17	South Dakota	25.0%
18	Iowa	23.5%
19	Louisiana	22.0%
20	Arizona	21.3%
21	Hawaii	21.6%
22	Alaska	20.0%
23	California	20.0%
24	South Carolina	20.0%
25	Vermont	20.0%
26	Florida	19.9%
27	Ohio	15.8%
28	Rhode Island	15.0%
29	Utah	12.5%
30	Texas	10.0%
31	Kentucky	9.6%
32	Colorado	8.0%
	Mean	41.0%

Note: States that use a tiered system are represented by a mean
Source: Funded National Policy Maps ELL

³⁸ Edbuild, [Funded: National Policy Maps ELL](#). Education Commission of the States, “[K-12 and Special Education Funding: English Learner Funding](#),” October 2021. Of the 16 states that do not provide multilingual learner funding based on a multiplier of the base per pupil amount, eight provide a flat allocation for each multilingual learner. Flat per student allocations vary from a low of \$352 in Alabama to a high of \$2,841 in Massachusetts. The remaining eight states use a variety of funding mechanisms; Illinois, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia provide additional funding based on teacher-to-student ratios, and the remaining four states using a reimbursement model or grant funding.

³⁹ This does not suggest that districts in each state receive that exact flat amount per multilingual learner; all three states calculate a state share based on a formula and related to the ability of the community to raise local education funds.

As depicted in Figure 11, if Rhode Island’s factor for multilingual learners was raised from 15.0 percent to 20.0 percent in FY 2025, additional aid to districts for multilingual learners would increase by roughly \$5.9 million. If Rhode Island’s factor was raised to 25.0 percent, district funding for multilingual learners would increase by \$11.8 million.⁴⁰ Regardless of the level of the increase, Providence would receive 57.6 percent of the additional funds. The remaining increase in funding for multilingual learners would be provided, in large part, to Pawtucket, Central Falls, Woonsocket, and Cranston—those districts with the most multilingual learners, and also among those districts with some of the worst outcomes for multilingual learners.

Figure 11
Modeled Cost of State Multilingual Learner Funding
Under Different Percent Weights, FY 2025

District	15%	20%	25%
Barrington	\$ 18,854	\$ 25,139	\$ 31,424
Bristol-Warren	\$ 34,495	\$ 45,946	\$ 57,432
Burrillville	\$ 9,425	\$ 12,567	\$ 15,709
Central Falls	\$ 1,934,108	\$ 2,578,812	\$ 3,223,515
Chariho	\$ 11,178	\$ 14,904	\$ 18,630
Coventry	\$ 11,447	\$ 15,263	\$ 19,079
Cranston	\$ 775,781	\$ 1,034,376	\$ 1,292,970
Cumberland	\$ 111,827	\$ 149,103	\$ 186,379
East Greenwich	\$ 17,315	\$ 23,087	\$ 28,859
East Providence	\$ 162,068	\$ 216,091	\$ 270,114
Exeter-West Greenwich	\$ 5,985	\$ 7,981	\$ 9,976
Foster-Glocester	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Jamestown	\$ 80	\$ 107	\$ 134
Johnston	\$ 178,713	\$ 238,285	\$ 297,856
Lincoln	\$ 44,805	\$ 59,741	\$ 74,676
Little Compton	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Middletown	\$ 47,028	\$ 62,705	\$ 78,382
Narragansett	\$ 541	\$ 722	\$ 903
New Shoreham	\$ 1,281	\$ 1,710	\$ 2,138
Newport	\$ 272,210	\$ 363,615	\$ 454,518
North Kingstown	\$ 28,764	\$ 38,352	\$ 47,940
North Providence	\$ 324,139	\$ 432,187	\$ 540,233
North Smithfield	\$ 9,028	\$ 12,038	\$ 15,047
Pawtucket	\$ 1,946,469	\$ 2,595,293	\$ 3,244,116
Portsmouth	\$ 2,493	\$ 3,325	\$ 4,157
Providence	\$ 10,145,016	\$ 13,526,688	\$ 16,908,360
Scituate	\$ 826	\$ 1,102	\$ 1,378
Smithfield	\$ 11,677	\$ 15,569	\$ 19,462
South Kingstown	\$ 10,902	\$ 14,536	\$ 18,170
Tiverton	\$ 3,662	\$ 4,883	\$ 6,104
Warwick	\$ 101,386	\$ 135,182	\$ 168,978
West Warwick	\$ 130,858	\$ 174,477	\$ 218,097
Westerly	\$ 19,379	\$ 25,840	\$ 32,300
Woonsocket	\$ 1,255,133	\$ 1,673,511	\$ 2,091,889
District Total	\$ 17,626,873	\$ 23,503,138	\$ 29,378,923

Source: RIDE; RIPEC calculations

⁴⁰ Calculations by RIPEC.

RIPEC Comments

Multilingual learners make up a rapidly growing student population in Rhode Island. Increasing by 62.8 percent over the last eight years, multilingual learners now make up 12.5 percent of the student population in school districts overall. Multilingual learners are also heavily concentrated in a few districts, with four of every five multilingual learners located in just five districts: Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket, Cranston, and Woonsocket. Providence alone represents more than half of multilingual learners statewide. The growth of multilingual learners, however, has not been restricted to those districts with historically high numbers of these students. East Providence, Johnston, Newport, North Providence, and Warwick have collectively seen their multilingual learner populations nearly triple in the last eight years and these communities now represent more than one-in-ten (11.6 percent) of the multilingual learners in district schools.

Despite the large numbers and rapid growth of multilingual learners in Rhode Island, the state provided no separate funding for multilingual learners until FY 2017, and until last year provided funding at such low levels that the state ranked near the bottom of the nation. The funding picture improved dramatically in FY 2024, when the General Assembly nearly quadrupled the total state allocation for multilingual learners in the most intensive programs from \$5.0 million to \$19.4 million. Despite this large increase, Rhode Island still ranks well behind its neighbors, Massachusetts and Connecticut, and behind most other states in the country in its level of funding for multilingual learners. Of the 31 states and Washington D.C. that use a percentage of the per pupil instruction cost for funding, Rhode Island's 15.0 percent factor is fifth lowest and well behind the mean of 41.0 percent for all states using a formula factor.

While spending on multilingual learners by districts is difficult to ascertain and may be unreliable, based on the reported data, districts within Rhode Island vary widely in their per pupil spending for multilingual learners, from a high of \$12,244 in South Kingstown to a low of \$2,554 in Cranston. The lowest per pupil spending occurs in districts with the highest numbers of multilingual learners and with relatively poor student outcomes for those students.

Student outcomes for multilingual learners are a major concern. Rhode Island's fourth and eighth grade multilingual learners trail the nation in math proficiency, while non-multilingual learners in the Ocean State are roughly on par with their peers nationally. There are also wide achievement gaps among Rhode Island districts. Some of the districts with the state's worst outcomes for multilingual learners also have the highest numbers of these students, and spend among the lowest amounts per multilingual learner.

Based on this analysis, RIPEC offers the following recommendations:

The factor for multilingual learners should be raised. To move closer to the national average and more in-line with its neighbors Connecticut and Massachusetts, Rhode Island should raise the factor for multilingual learners from 15.0 percent to at least 25.0 percent. The Rhode Island General Assembly took a necessary step in FY 2024 by raising the factor for multilingual learners from 10.0 percent to 15.0 percent. The Assembly also deserves credit for removing the appropriations cap which

limited the amount of funding that districts could receive for multilingual learners. However, Rhode Island is still behind the curve when it comes to funding. Raising the factor to 25.0 percent would provide an additional \$11.8 million to districts for multilingual learners. Most of this funding would be allocated to school districts that have the most multilingual learners, the most students in poverty, and the worst learning outcomes for multilingual learners.

Funding for multilingual learners should be incorporated into the state funding formula.

Additional funding for multilingual learners should be allocated as discretionary funding to LEAs in the same manner as additional formula funding for students in poverty rather than through categorical funds allocated on a reimbursement basis. Multilingual learners benefit not only from specialized services that qualify for funding under RIDE’s grant reimbursement process, but such learners also gain when the general educational environment—including high quality curriculum, effective professional development, and supportive administration—is strong for all students.⁴¹ It is no accident that some of Rhode Island’s most well-funded and highest performing schools have the strongest outcomes for multilingual learners.

Funding for multilingual learners should be based on the most recent student data.

The reference year for multilingual learner student counts currently is based on data from two years prior to the funding year and results in an undercounting of such students given the rapid growth of this population. For FY 2024, basing student counts on more recent data would have provided an additional \$0.9 million in funding for districts.⁴² ACCESS test results will be available on April 29, 2024, which gives the Assembly ample time to consider the most recent data in their funding calculations for FY 2025.⁴³ RIDE should investigate potential mechanisms to ensure funding is based on the most recent student data.

Data collection and reporting should be improved.

There is a lack of reliable data as to spending by districts on programs for multilingual learners. Several districts have failed to report their budgets in a timely manner and existing data depicts wide gaps in per pupil spending among school districts, which calls into question the accuracy of data reporting. Improving equity in funding to help improve student outcomes for multilingual learners requires, at a minimum, that districts provide timely and accurate reporting of expenditures on multilingual learner programs.

The Rhode Island General Assembly should conduct a comprehensive review of the funding formula for education.

State funding for multilingual learners should be included in a larger conversation about education spending in the Ocean State. RIPEC has called for a comprehensive review of the state education funding formula, which has been affected by a patchwork of multiple,

⁴¹ See Elmore, 2004, “School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance,” Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA. Brisk, 2006, “Bilingual Education: From Compensatory to Quality Schooling,” Routledge. London. Elfers, “[Building Systems of Support for Classroom Teachers Working with English Language Learners](#),” International Multilingual Research Journal, June 2013. Santos and Hopkins, “[Creating Schools and Systems that Support Asset-Based High-Quality Instruction for Multilingual Learners](#),” California Department of Education, 2020. Sugarman, “[Funding English Learner Education: Making the Most of Policy and Budget Levers](#),” National Center on Immigration Integration Policy, March 2021.

⁴² Multilingual learners in the most intensive programs grew by 749 students (6.0 percent) from 2022 to 2023. RIDE data.

⁴³ WIDA, [Rhode Island: Assessment Testing Dates](#).

complicated changes adopted over several years. These changes resulted in inequitable funding allocations, where some of the state's wealthiest districts recently have received the largest per-pupil percentage increases.⁴⁴ The formula has not operated as intended for the last three fiscal years and needs reform.

⁴⁴ RIPEC, "[Rhode Island's Education Funding Formula Revised](#)," July 2023.

Figure 12
Change in Multilingual Learners, 2015 - 2023

District	2015	2023	Change
Barrington	37	85	48
Bristol-Warren	160	61	-99
Burrillville	5	14	9
Central Falls	683	1,276	593
Chariho	16	15	-1
Coventry	13	26	13
Cranston	514	1,083	569
Cumberland	61	239	178
East Greenwich	22	35	13
East Providence	182	264	82
Exeter-West Greenwich	14	14	0
Foster-Glocester	0	4	4
Jamestown	3	1	-2
Johnston	113	270	157
Lincoln	23	83	60
Little Compton	0	0	0
Middletown	94	161	67
Narragansett	4	4	0
Newport	112	367	255
New Shoreham	10	18	8
North Kingstown	68	91	23
North Providence	91	402	311
North Smithfield	9	25	16
Pawtucket	927	1,568	641
Portsmouth	11	30	19
Providence	5,480	7,717	2,237
Scituate	0	2	2
Smithfield	11	31	20
South Kingstown	0	51	51
Tiverton	9	12	3
Warwick	97	221	124
Westerly	55	70	15
West Warwick	99	123	24
Woonsocket	450	900	450
District Total	9,373	15,263	5,890

Source: RIDE data; RIPEC calculations