



Date: March 31, 2022

To: Gregg Amore and Members of the House Finance, Subcommittee on Education

From: Linda Katz, JD, Policy Director

Re: Budget of the RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

The Economic Progress Institute submits this testimony on behalf of The Workforce Alliance, an association of adult education and training providers, policy and advocate organizations and philanthropic entities committed to ensuring our state has a high quality, inclusive workforce development system that meets the needs of all workers.

The RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is charged with administering the Adult Education system (RIGL 16-63-1 et seq). We write to urge the Committee to review the funding that is currently appropriated by RIDE for this system and to make additional state investments of general revenue and ARPA funds to ensure that the Adult Education system can meet the needs of Rhode Islanders and employers.

The adult education system is comprised of 20 organizations that together serve several thousand Rhode Island adults each year. Pre-COVID annual enrollment ranged from 6,000 – 8,000. During the first year of the pandemic, the network pivoted to remote learning and was able to continue to serve 5,000 learners. Many programs provided assistance to parents who were helping their own children navigate the challenges of learning from home. Now, programs continue to provide access to remote learning opportunities and have also re-opened for in-person classes and training.

The system provides foundational skills necessary for adults to succeed in the workforce and life, including English language proficiency, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. It prepares students to take the High School Equivalency (commonly called GED) test and many programs are “GED” testing sites. Most programs provide Integrated Employment and Training, a ‘best practice’ for adult learners that combines foundational and occupational skills training. Participants can take courses to be a CNA, for example, while improving their English language or literacy skills. Programs also offer “Learn to Earn” opportunities such as apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeship programs to prepare adults for these opportunities. Programs help adults transition to college, if that is their goal. Programs partner with employers through the Real Jobs program.

The adult education system is a vital part of the state’s workforce development system – serving new arrivals to the state as well as Rhode Islanders who have not gained sufficient skills in the K-12 system to move on to career or college. **There are 68,500 working age adults who lack a high school credential in Rhode Island and 31,200 adults who do not speak English well or at all.**

**By 2025, at least 70% of jobs in RI will require some post-secondary education (degree, apprenticeship, industry-recognized credential or license).** Adult education programs help thousands of

adults achieve the basic skills they need to enroll in a training program (8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level) and to attain a High School Equivalency diploma that is necessary for post-secondary education.

To both promote economic mobility for workers and provide businesses with the workforce they need, we must ensure that all Rhode Island adults have the foundational workforce skills provided by the adult education system.

The system is vital to ameliorating the disparities in economic mobility based on race and ethnicity that existed pre-COVID and have been highlighted by the pandemic. More Latinx and Black Rhode Islanders worked in direct care positions that put them at risk, or lost jobs in retail and hospitality and need the foundational skills, especially English language and digital literacy provided by the adult education system to enter new jobs. Committed to providing training in 'in-demand' industries, programs offer training in the health care field (CNAs, Med Tech, Phlebotomy) and hospitality services – thus helping to fill vacancies in these sectors that are currently seeking skilled workers.

The budget of the adult education system is around \$9M, including \$3.5M from the Job Development Fund (JDF), \$2M in general revenue, \$2.3M from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and \$1 million from the TANF block grant. The funds from the JDF are used to leverage additional federal from through the SNAP Employment and Training Program. **The budget has not been increased in at least 12 years, with general revenue funds frozen at the just amount that is necessary to draw down the federal WIOA funding.** Massachusetts has increased funding for its adult education program in each of the last three years.

Moreover, **the Adult Education system has not received any federal relief funds from RIDE or the state.** The Governor's proposed 2023 budget does not appropriate any funds for Adult Education. Other states, including New Hampshire and Vermont, have used federal relief funds to support their adult education systems.

Representative Cortvriend has submitted a bill (H-7637) that would appropriate around \$11M in ARPA funds for one-time investments in the Adult Education system, including expanding digital literacy capacity, "Integrated Employment and Training" and "Learn to Earn" programs. The bill would also appropriate an additional \$500,000 in general revenue to account for the loss of the value of the state investment.

**We respectfully request that this Committee advocate to both increase the general revenue investment and appropriation of ARPA funds in the final 2023 budget.**

---