

2025 -- S 0112

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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2025

A N A C T

RELATING TO EDUCATION -- THE BRIGHT TODAY SCHOLARSHIP AND OPEN ENROLLMENT EDUCATION ACT

Introduced By: Senators de la Cruz, E Morgan, and Rogers

Date Introduced: January 31, 2025

Referred To: Senate Finance

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Title 16 of the General Laws entitled "EDUCATION" is hereby amended by
2 adding thereto the following chapter:

3 CHAPTER 117

4 THE BRIGHT TODAY SCHOLARSHIP AND OPEN ENROLLMENT EDUCATION ACT

5 **16-117-1. Short title.**

6 This act shall be known and may be cited as "The Bright Today Scholarship and Open
7 Enrollment Education Act."

8 **16-117-2. Purpose.**

9 (a) The purpose of this chapter is to provide parents of kindergarten through grade twelve
10 (K-12) students in Rhode Island with an opportunity to enroll their child in an educational program
11 of their choosing, either via open enrollment in a traditional public school in their own district or
12 in any other public school district, or by receiving a scholarship, with designated public monies to
13 follow the student to the private school or private curriculum program selected by the parent.

14 (b) National research demonstrates that with scholarships, similar to those provided for in
15 this chapter, public school districts can actually save money and in most instances also see
16 improved academic outcomes because of the new "parental" accountability standards they will be
17 held to.

18 (c) Further, this chapter has been crafted to ensure that more money per pupil remains in

1 public school districts, even after scholarships have been awarded from the state portion of
2 educational funding to districts.

3 **16-117-3. Definition of terms.**

4 As used in this chapter, the following terms shall have the following meanings unless the
5 context clearly indicates otherwise:

6 (1) "Base funding" means and refers to a resident district's funding from state and local
7 sources to serve and educate students on a per pupil basis. Federal funds are not included.

8 (2) "Bright today scholarships" ("scholarships"), sometimes referred to in this chapter as
9 "educations savings accounts (ESAs)" means and will be offered to all students that are, or will
10 become, enrolled in any public, private, or home school system in the State of Rhode Island. The
11 scholarships allow parents to utilize certain funds that would normally be allocated to their child at
12 their resident school district for an educational program as determined by the parents or guardian
13 of the child.

14 (3) "Curriculum" means a complete course of study for a particular content area or grade
15 level, including any supplemental materials required by the curriculum.

16 (4) "Department" means the Rhode Island department of elementary and secondary
17 education (RIDE) or any other organization designated by RIDE to administer the bright today
18 scholarship program.

19 (5) "Eligible student" means any kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) student who
20 meets any of the following requirements:

21 (i) Attended a public school as a full-time student in Rhode Island in the preceding
22 semester;

23 (ii) Is beginning school in Rhode Island for the first time; or

24 (iii) Attended a private school or received at-home instruction in conformance with § 16-
25 19-1 in the preceding semester.

26 (6) "Open enrollment" means a policy adopted and implemented by a school district
27 governing board to allow resident transfer pupils to enroll in any school within the school district.
28 to allow resident pupils to enroll in any school located within other school districts in this state, or
29 to allow nonresident pupils to enroll in any school within the district.

30 (7) "Parent" means a resident of Rhode Island who is the parent or legal guardian of an
31 eligible student.

32 (8) "Participating school" means any private school that provides education to students in
33 fulfillment of any grades, kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12), and has notified the
34 department of its intention to participate in the bright today scholarship program and to comply

1 with the requirements of the program as defined by this chapter or subsequently regulated by the
2 department for the implementation thereof.

3 (9) "Participating student" means any eligible student or qualified student who is accepted
4 into the bright today scholarship program.

5 (10) "Qualified funding" refers to the additional funds allocated by the state for students
6 having a disability under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794) or chapter
7 24 of title 16.

8 (11) "Qualified school" means a nongovernmental primary or secondary school or a
9 preschool for handicapped students that is located in this state and that conforms with the
10 requirements for such schools within Rhode Island.

11 (12) "Qualified student" means a resident of this state who is an "eligible student", and who
12 is any of the following:

13 (i) Identified as having a disability under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29
14 U.S.C. 794); or

15 (ii) A child with a disability who is eligible to receive services from a school district under
16 chapter 24 of title 16.

17 (13) "Resident school district" means the public school district in which the student resides.

18 (14) "Treasurer" means the office of the Rhode Island general treasurer.

19 **16-117-4. Core components and requirements of the bright today scholarship**
20 **program.**

21 (a) Scholarships. Scholarships are established to provide options for the education of
22 students in Rhode Island.

23 (b) Enrollment. Any parent of a participating student may enroll the student for a
24 scholarship by signing an agreement whereby the parent promises:

25 (1) To provide an education for the participating student in at least the subjects of reading,
26 grammar, mathematics, social studies and science;

27 (2) Not to enroll the participating student in a school district or charter school and release
28 the school district from all obligations to educate the qualified student;

29 (3) To use the money deposited in the participating student's bright today scholarship
30 account only for the following expenses of the participating student:

31 (i) Tuition or fees at a participating school or a qualified school;

32 (ii) Textbooks required by a participating school, qualified school, or private tutoring
33 curriculum;

34 (iii) Tutoring services provided by a tutor accredited by a state, regional or national

1 accrediting organization;
2 (iv) Curriculum;
3 (v) Tuition or fees for a non-public online learning program;
4 (vi) Fees for a nationally standardized norm-referenced achievement test, advanced
5 placement examinations or any exams related to college or university admission;
6 (vii) Educational therapies or services for the qualified student from a licensed or
7 accredited practitioner or provider, including licensed or accredited paraprofessionals or
8 educational aides;
9 (viii) Fees for courses at an eligible postsecondary institution, taken prior to the student's
10 graduation from high school or the equivalent;
11 (ix) Fees for management of the scholarship account by firms selected by the general
12 treasurer; and
13 (x) Services provided by a public school, including individual classes and extracurricular
14 programs;
15 (4) Any unspent funds may be rolled over and shall remain in the participating student's
16 scholarship for use in future years during the participating student's kindergarten through grade
17 twelve (K-12) educational career;
18 (5) Not to use monies deposited in the participating student's account for any of the
19 following:
20 (i) Computer hardware or other technological devices, except as required in lieu of
21 textbooks or for the completion of specific course requirements;
22 (ii) Transportation of the pupil; and
23 (iii) Consumable educational supplies, including, but not limited to, paper, pens or markers;
24 (c) Parent payments. Parents will be allowed to make payments for the costs of educational
25 programs and services not covered by the funds in their scholarship accounts.
26 (d) Department scholarship account fund. In exchange for the parent's agreement pursuant
27 to subsection (b) of this section, the department shall transfer from the aggregate monies that would
28 otherwise be allocated to the participating student's resident school district a payment for base
29 funding or qualified funding as described in subsections (e), (f), and (g) of this section, to the
30 general treasurer for deposit into an individual bright today scholarship account to be managed by
31 the parents of the student. The department may retain a maximum of three percent (3%) of each
32 individual scholarship awarded in any given school year for deposit in the department's scholarship
33 account fund to be used for administration of the scholarship program.
34 (e) Base funding -- Scholarship award schedule for new and switching students. Grant

1 amounts to scholarship accounts of families of eligible students will be determined by the following
2 guidelines; provided that, no individual student's scholarship shall exceed six thousand dollars
3 (\$6,000);

4 (1) For students from households qualifying for the federal free or reduced-price lunch
5 program, each student's scholarship amount shall be equal to one hundred percent (100%) of the
6 resident district's base funding.

7 (2) For students from households with annual income greater than the amount required to
8 qualify for the free or reduced lunch program but less than or equal to one and one-half (1.5) times
9 that amount, each student's scholarship amount shall be equal to seventy-five percent (75%) of the
10 resident district's base funding.

11 (3) For students from households with annual income of greater than one and one-half (1.5)
12 times the amount required to qualify for the free or reduced lunch program but less than or equal
13 to two (2) times that amount, each student's scholarship amount shall be equal to fifty percent (50%)
14 of the resident district's base funding.

15 (4) For students from households with annual income of greater than two (2) times the
16 amount required to qualify for the free or reduced lunch program but less than or equal to two and
17 one-half (2.5) times that amount, each student's scholarship amount shall be equal to twenty-five
18 percent (25%) of the resident district's base funding.

19 (5) For students from households with annual income of greater than two and one-half (2.5)
20 times the amount required to qualify for the free or reduced lunch program, each student's
21 scholarship amount shall be equal to fifteen percent (15%) of the resident district's base funding.

22 (f) Base funding -- Scholarship award schedule for students attending private school or
23 receiving at-home instruction at the time of enactment. Grant amounts to scholarship accounts of
24 families of approved students pursuant to this chapter shall be equal to the scholarships for their
25 household income level, as set forth in subsection (e) of this section; provided that, each student's
26 scholarship amount shall be reduced by seventy-five percent (75%).

27 (g) Qualified funding -- Scholarship awards. For any student having a disability who is
28 accepted into the bright today scholarship account program, the scholarship amount will be equal
29 to the scholarships for their household income level, as described in this section, plus the additional
30 qualified funding designated for that student. The department may reduce the additional qualified
31 funding award by an amount sufficient to reimburse the department and the resident school district
32 for services assessing the student or developing an individual education plan for that student;
33 provided that, such reimbursements shall not exceed five percent (5%) of the additional qualified
34 funding award.

1 (h) A parent must renew the participating student's scholarship account on an annual basis.
2 A student who has previously qualified for a bright today scholarship account shall remain eligible
3 to apply for renewal until the student graduates with a high school diploma or the equivalent.

4 (i) A participating school, qualified school, or a provider of services purchased pursuant to
5 § 16-117-4(b)(3) shall not share, refund, or rebate any bright today scholarship account monies
6 with the parent, eligible student, or qualified student in any manner.

7 (j) A participating student shall be counted in the enrollment figures for his or her resident
8 school district for the purposes of the state funding formula under the permanent foundation
9 education aid set forth in chapter 7.2 of this title for as long as that student remains an eligible
10 student under this chapter. The department shall subsequently subtract the total aggregate
11 scholarship amounts awarded to students within each resident district from that district's state
12 school aid.

13 (k) In subsequent years following enactment of this chapter, for "participating" students
14 who have entered the state's kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) educational system for the
15 first time, fifteen percent (15%) of the total number of such students shall be counted in the
16 enrollment figures for his or her resident school district for the purposes of the state funding formula
17 under the permanent foundation education aid set forth in chapter 7.2 of this title, for as long as
18 those students remain "eligible" students pursuant to the provisions of this chapter.

19 (l) Funds in the scholarship account may only be used during the student's kindergarten
20 through grade twelve (K-12) educational career. Upon the participating student's graduation with a
21 high school diploma or the equivalent, the student's bright today scholarship account shall be closed
22 and any remaining funds shall be returned to the Rhode Island department of elementary and
23 secondary education.

24 (m) Monies received pursuant to this chapter do not constitute taxable income to the parent
25 of the participating student.

26 **16-117-5. Administration of bright today scholarship accounts.**

27 (a) The department shall determine a specified "application period" that is between April
28 1 and June 30 of each year during which it will accept applications for the following fiscal year.

29 (b) The department shall adopt rules and policies necessary for the administration of
30 scholarship accounts, including policies for conducting examinations of use of account funds,
31 Conducting random quarterly and annual reviews of accounts, potentially including, but not limited
32 to, creating an online anonymous fraud reporting service, and creating an anonymous telephone
33 hotline for fraud reporting.

34 (c) The general treasurer may contract with private financial management firms to manage

1 bright today scholarship accounts; provided the treasurer maintains supervision of the process.

2 (d) The debarment shall have the authority to conduct or contract for annual or random
3 audits of scholarship accounts, to ensure compliance with this chapter.

4 (e) A parent or participating student or vendor may be disqualified from program
5 participation if the party is found to have committed an intentional program violation consisting of
6 any misrepresentation or other act that materially violates a law or rule governing the program. The
7 department may then remove any parent or participating student from future eligibility for a bright
8 today scholarship account and shall notify the treasurer. A parent, student, or vendor may appeal
9 the department's decision pursuant to an appeal process to be established by the department and as
10 set forth in chapter 39 of title 16.

11 (f) The department may refer cases of substantial misuse of monies to the attorney general
12 for investigation if the department obtains evidence of fraudulent use of an account.

13 (g) The department shall make quarterly transfers of the amount calculated for base funding
14 and qualified funding pursuant to the provisions of § 16-117-4 to the general treasurer for deposit
15 into the individual scholarship account of each qualified student.

16 (h) A person commits savings account fraud if the person knowingly obtains by means of
17 a false statement or representation, by impersonation, or by other fraudulent device any of the
18 following:

- 19 (1) Assistance or service to which that person is not entitled;
- 20 (2) Assistance or service greater than that to which the person is entitled; and
- 21 (3) Payment for services or materials not listed in § 16-117-4(b)(3).

22 (i) No financial institution shall be liable in any civil action for providing a scholarship
23 account's financial information to the department of education unless the information provided is
24 false and the financial institution providing the false information does so knowingly and with
25 malice.

26 **16-117-6. Administrative and academic accountability standards.**

27 To hold participating schools accountable and to ensure that certain administrative
28 standards are met to treat all students safely and fairly, participating schools shall:

- 29 (1) Comply with all state laws dealing with health and safety that apply to private schools;
- 30 (2) Maintain a valid occupancy permit, as may be required by state or local laws;
- 31 (3) Certify their compliance with nondiscrimination policies and provisions set forth in 42
32 U.S.C. 1981; and
- 33 (4) Provide parents with a receipt for all qualifying expenses at the school.

34 **16-117-7. Academic accountability standards.**

1 In order to allow parents and taxpayers to measure the achievements of the program:

2 (1) Parents shall ensure that:

3 (i) Each year, participating students within their households take either the state
4 achievement tests or nationally norm-referenced tests that measure learning gains in math and
5 language arts and provide for value-added assessment;

6 (ii) The results of these tests are provided to the department on an annual basis, beginning
7 with the first year of testing;

8 (iii) The student information is reported in a way that would allow the state to aggregate
9 data by grade level, gender, family income level, and race; and

10 (iv) The department will be informed of the eligible student's graduation from high school,
11 or the equivalent.

12 (2) The department shall:

13 (i) Ensure compliance with all student privacy laws;

14 (ii) Collect all test results from all participating students;

15 (iii) Provide aggregate test results, associated learning gains, and graduation rates to the
16 public via a state website after the third year of test and graduation-related data collection. The
17 findings shall be aggregated by the students' grade level, gender, family income level, number of
18 years of participation in the scholarship program, and race;

19 (iv) Provide graduation rates to the public via a state website after the third year of test and
20 test-related data collection;

21 (v) Administer an annual parental satisfaction survey that shall ask parents of students
22 receiving scholarship accounts to express:

23 (A) Their satisfaction with the program; and

24 (B) Their opinions on other topics, items, or issues that the state finds would elicit
25 information about the effectiveness of scholarship accounts program and the number of years their
26 child has participated in the program.

27 **16-117-8. Prohibition of state control over nonpublic schools and homeschools.**

28 (a) This chapter shall not permit any government agency to exercise control or supervision
29 over any nonpublic school or homeschool.

30 (b) Participating schools or parents or groups providing at-home instructions that accept
31 payments from a scholarship account pursuant to this chapter are not agents of the state or federal
32 governments.

33 (c) A participating or qualified school shall not be required to alter its creed, practices,
34 admissions policies, or curricula in order to accept students whose parents pay tuition or fees from

1 scholarship accounts pursuant to this chapter in order to participate.

2 (d) Participating private schools, providers of at-home instruction, and other education
3 providers shall be given the maximum freedom to provide for the educational needs of their
4 students without governmental or departmental control.

5 (e) In any legal proceeding challenging the application of this chapter to a participating
6 school, the state bears the burden of establishing that the law is necessary and does not impose any
7 undue burden on participating schools or providers.

8 **16-117-9. Responsibilities of the department.**

9 (a) The department shall ensure that eligible students and their parents are informed
10 annually of which schools will be participating in the scholarship account program. Special
11 attention shall be paid to ensuring that lower-income families are made aware of the program and
12 their options.

13 (b) The department shall create a standard form that parents of eligible students can submit
14 to establish their students' eligibility for the scholarship account program. The department shall
15 ensure that the application is readily available to interested families through various sources,
16 including the Internet.

17 (c) The department may bar a participating school or education provider from the
18 scholarship account program if the department establishes that the participating school or education
19 provider has:

20 (1) Routinely failed to comply with the accountability standards established in this chapter;
21 or

22 (2) Failed to provide the eligible student with the educational services funded by the
23 scholarship account.

24 (d) If the department decides to bar a participating school or education provider from the
25 program, it shall notify eligible students and their parents of this decision as quickly as possible.

26 (e) The department shall adopt rules and procedures as necessary for the administration of
27 the scholarship account program.

28 **16-117-10. Responsibilities of the resident school district.**

29 (a) The resident school district shall provide a participating school or education provider
30 that has admitted an eligible student under this program with a complete copy of the student's school
31 records, while complying with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (20 U.S.C.
32 1232g).

33 (b) The resident school district shall provide transportation for an eligible student to and
34 from the participating school or education provider under the same conditions as the resident school

1 district is required to provide transportation for other resident students to private schools as per
2 current law. The resident school district may qualify for any existing state transportation aid for
3 each student so transported.

4 (c) Nothing in this chapter shall be construed as supplanting the responsibilities of resident
5 districts as provided in current law.

6 **16-117-11. Open enrollment.**

7 (a) Definitions. For the purposes of this section:

8 (1) "Nonresident pupil" means a pupil who resides in the State of Rhode Island and who is
9 enrolled in or is seeking enrollment in a school district other than the school district in which the
10 pupil resides.

11 (2) "Open enrollment" means a policy adopted and implemented by a school district
12 governing board to allow resident transfer pupils to enroll in any school within the school district,
13 to allow resident pupils to enroll in any school located within other school districts in this state, or
14 to allow nonresident pupils to enroll in any school within the district.

15 (3) "Resident transfer pupil" means a resident pupil who is enrolled in or seeking
16 enrollment in a school that is within the school district but outside the attendance area of the pupil's
17 residence.

18 (4) "Receiving school district" means the school district that has accepted enrollment of a
19 nonresident pupil.

20 (b) Enrollment policies.

21 (1) School district governing boards shall establish inter-district open enrollment policies.

22 (2) State funding adjustments may be arranged for nonresident pupils only if two (2) school
23 districts have entered into a voluntary agreement for such adjustments for certain pupils. These
24 policies shall include admission criteria, available capacity, application procedures, and
25 transportation provisions. Any and all funding adjustments will be made via associated adjustments
26 of the state portion of funds distributed to the mutually agreed districts.

27 (3) A copy of the district policies for open enrollment shall be posted on the district's
28 website and shall be available to the public on request.

29 (i) Each policy shall describe the opportunities for resident pupils to transfer to other
30 schools within the district or outside of the district and the opportunities for nonresident pupils to
31 transfer to schools within the district.

32 (ii) Each nonresident pupil shall be counted in the enrollment figures for his or her new
33 "receiving school district." for the purposes of the state funding formula under chapter 7.2 of this
34 title.

1 (iii) Resident transfer pupils and nonresident pupils shall be permitted to remain in the
2 school into which they were initially accepted through completion of the highest grade offered in
3 that school and may be given enrollment preference for other schools within the receiving school
4 district.

5 (iv) A school district may give enrollment preference to and reserve capacity for pupils
6 who are children of persons who are employed by or at a school in the school district.

7 (v) The resident school district shall provide transportation for a nonresident or resident
8 transfer pupils to and from the participating school or education provider under the same conditions
9 as the resident school district is required to provide transportation for other resident students to
10 private schools as per current law. The resident school district may qualify for any existing state
11 transportation aid for each student so transported.

12 (vi) Nothing in this section shall be construed to limit or replace specific agreements that
13 school districts may have with other school districts upon enactment of this chapter or to limit their
14 right to enter into such agreements thereafter.

15 (c) District and school immunity. A school district and its employees are immune from
16 civil liability for decisions that concern the acceptance or rejection of a nonresident pupil for
17 enrollment and that are based on a good faith application of the requirements of this chapter and
18 the standards adopted pursuant to this chapter.

19 **16-117-12. Commencement of program.**

20 The bright today scholarship and open enrollment program shall be in effect beginning
21 August 1, 2025.

22 SECTION 2. This act shall take effect upon passage.

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EXPLANATION
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF
A N A C T
RELATING TO EDUCATION -- THE BRIGHT TODAY SCHOLARSHIP AND OPEN
ENROLLMENT EDUCATION ACT

1 This act would provide parents of kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) students in
2 Rhode Island with an opportunity to enroll their child in an educational program of their choosing,
3 either via open enrollment in a traditional public school in their own district or any other public
4 school district, or by receiving a scholarship, with designated public monies to follow the student
5 to a participating private school or private curriculum program selected by the parent. The program
6 combines aspects of what are sometimes referred to as "school choice" and "school voucher"
7 programs. The program would begin August 1, 2025.

8 This act would take effect upon passage.

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