



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-1196
401-222-2080

Gina M. Raimondo
Governor

July 16, 2019

TO THE HONORABLE, THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE:

In accordance with the provisions of Article IX, Section 14 of the Constitution of the State of Rhode Island, and Section 43-1-4 of the Rhode Island General Laws, I transmit, with my disapproval, 2019-S 46, “An Act Relating to Education – School Committees and Superintendents.”

This legislation would allow school districts with approval from local school boards to substitute teacher-led classroom instruction for virtual learning for as many as five school days a year.

Current law allows school districts to adopt virtual learning plans that can be used in the event of inclement weather. Under that law, virtual learning plans must be approved by the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) for the program to count as an official school day. Approval is required, in part, to ensure that the curriculum maintains a high level of rigor in instruction and guarantees that students who lack access to technology at home are not left behind. Accordingly, RIDE developed an evaluative policy that employs high standards for content and accessibility, so that students are challenged with grade-level appropriate work through virtual learning, but no student is placed at a disadvantage for not having access to technology outside of school. Moreover, RIDE’s policy ensures that appropriate, federally-required accommodations are in place for students with documented disabilities as well as English language learners.

Senate Bill 46 amends the existing law and creates a clear work-around, bypassing RIDE and allowing school districts to adopt and implement independent policies. At my urging, RIDE set the bar high for virtual learning plans to protect students and to guarantee that if a student were to participate in virtual learning, the quality of the educational experience would be the equivalent of an official day at school. Plans submitted by some districts have fallen short of the benchmark set by RIDE, suggesting that high-quality instruction would not be guaranteed on virtual learning days without RIDE oversight.

Our 2018 RICAS scores demonstrate that all of our school districts require improvement. Every school day matters. We need more days of high-quality teaching and learning, not fewer. Reducing students’ time with teachers – or establishing in law the idea that a packet of worksheets is equivalent to a full day of school with a trained and certified teacher – is not a strategy that increases academic performance.

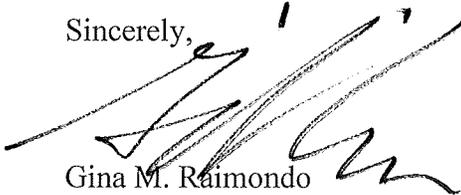
The Rhode Island Association of School Principals, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, and the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association share my concerns regarding matters of student equity and the potential negative impacts to students without access to technology at home. These groups also rightly point out the inevitable high degree of inconsistency among districts if approval is left to local school boards and not decided upon a unified standard by RIDE.

I am supportive of developing innovative ways to ensure that snow days and inclement weather do not interrupt instruction. It is commendable that the legislature seeks to empower schools to develop flexible and innovative approaches to continue learning during unplanned days off. But, we cannot be cavalier about shortening the school year.

By requiring RIDE approval for virtual learning plans, the State has a mechanism to guarantee that all students participate in high-quality educational experiences if a virtual learning day is to count as one of the 180 official school days. Without RIDE approval, we have no ability to ensure the integrity and rigor of academic instruction via virtual learning. Our students' education is too valuable to risk up to a week of instruction without such a safeguard.

I disapprove of this legislation and respectfully urge your support of my veto.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gina M. Raimondo', written over a horizontal line.

Gina M. Raimondo
Governor