



**Prudence Island School Foundation**  
**P.O. Box 282 / 0413 Broadway, Prudence Island, RI 02872**

**Press Release: May 11, 2019**

The Prudence Island School is once again fighting to stay open.

It is Rhode Island's last operating one-room schoolhouse and one of only a handful left in New England. The school, built in 1896, is on Prudence Island which sits in the middle of Narragansett Bay and is part of the Town of Portsmouth. With the exception of a brief hiatus from 1982 to 1989, the school has operated continuously for 123 years.

At the request of the Portsmouth School Department, an agreement made with the Prudence Island School Foundation, which currently educates Prudence Island children, will be terminated at the end of 2018-2019 school year.

In 2007 the Portsmouth School Department faced fiscal constraints and decided to close the Prudence Island school and transport the children to Portsmouth schools for their education. The parents opposed the closing and took the matter to the RI Commissioner of Education. In a detailed decision, the Commissioner stated that, "The time involved in getting to and from school, at such a young age, presents more than an undue level of inconvenience, but is so extreme as to render the proposed transportation arrangements 'unsuitable' under state law." The School Department then proposed sending the children to Bristol schools, which was equally unacceptable to parents, as they would still be separated from their young children by the bay.

In 2009, residents of Prudence Island formed the Prudence Island School Foundation (PISF) to work with the Town to resolve the issue. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Town of Portsmouth, the Prudence Island School Foundation and the Portsmouth School Department was the outcome. In the agreement, the PISF agreed to provide education for the elementary-aged students and pay the expenses related to maintaining the historic school building, while the Town agreed to pay a per-student dollar amount through civic support for each elementary-aged student attending the program. The per-student dollar amount was based on the cost of paying tuition to Bristol, and for the 2018-2019 school year, that amount totaled to slightly more than \$55,000.

A letter sent to the Foundation on December 14, 2018 and signed by Emily Copeland, chair of the School Committee, cites the maintenance of the school building as the reason for terminating the MOU. In it, she points to \$15,000 the School Committee paid towards replacing the aging roof as proof that the PISF was not upholding its end of the agreement.

In response, Allan Bearse, PISF's Chairperson states, "We have fulfilled our part of the MOU. We have maintained the building for ten years, including replacing doors and windows, painting, paying utilities and insurance. All that on top of providing an excellent education for all of our children which includes those not covered by the civic support given by Portsmouth.\*\* The only thing we were requesting assistance for was the re-roofing. The roof has needed repair since before the building was the PISF's responsibility and it was getting critical. We simply asked for their help given the significant cost involved."

As to the children, the School Department has offered that families could send their elementary age children to Portsmouth. This would require leaving home at approximately 6:00 AM and leaving school 15 minutes early every day to catch a ferry back to the island. The total time away from home would be over 10 hours and would include multiple transitions from bus to ferry to bus, as well as a required stint in daycare (provided for by the School Department). This would be in defiance of the 2007 decision by the Rhode Island Department of Education quoted above.

While there may be an option to send children to school in Bristol, this would require the same amount of time involved as Portsmouth. The children's day could only be shortened by being late to school every morning and leaving early every afternoon.

The budget for the Portsmouth School Department for 2019-2020 is in excess of \$38,000,000.

Foundation leaders plan to make their appeal for continuance of the civic support before the Town Council at its regular meeting on May 13. The meeting begins at 7pm and is held at the Portsmouth Town Hall.

\*\* Parents of children not covered by civic support can choose to pay tuition. If they cannot afford the full tuition, scholarships are paid by generous donations from the Island community.

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