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Testimony Re: House Bill 7232 Re: Education Accountability Act
House Education Committee
January 30, 2024
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 7232 and thank Chairman McNamara for his leadership on this issue and Representatives Potter, Alzate, J. Lombardi, Voas, Ackerman, and Corvese for co-sponsoring. This bill would incorporate *SurveyWorks* school climate indicators, and/or other future systems to measure school climate, into the performance evaluation of school districts and individual public schools.

School climate is the character and quality of life within a school building and is defined by several indicators, including the relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community; safety; facilities; the availability of school-based health supports; discipline policies; and academic outcomes. A positive school climate is an essential element of an effective learning environment and can improve student and teacher attendance, student motivation to learn, academic achievement, and graduation rates.

In December 2020, the Rhode Island Department of Education announced the new district accountability system, the *Rhode Island Education Accountability Act* established in 2019. The system uses six indicators, including School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) to measure some elements of school climate, like student and teacher absenteeism and suspension. However, **we believe** accountability **should** include **additional** important school climate indicators such as student and family engagement, student sense of belonging, family support, teacher-student relationships, safety, and facilities. School climate surveys collect critical information about family, student, faculty, and staff perceptions and are an easy way to understand what is happening in a school. Using student surveys as part of an accountability system is not new. Eight states (Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, and South Carolina) have included school climate, or engagement surveys in their state accountability plan under the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Using school climate surveys in accountability systems creates a fuller picture of school performance. In addition, it incentivizes district and school staff to enact policies and practices that support a positive school climate.

Our 2020 report, [*Policies and Practices Supporting Student-Centered Learning in Rhode Island: School Climate*](#) report uses an equity lens to look at policies, practices, and measures of school climate, including student mental and behavioral health, and suggests actions Rhode Island can take to ensure that all students, particularly students of color, low-income students, differently abled students, and Multilingual Learners, are in schools that prioritize strong relationships between students and educators and promote excellent, equitable learning while also ensuring student safety and emotional well-being.

School climate surveys offer an essential opportunity to incorporate the experiences and voices of students, families, and educators into the accountability system and make changes in relevant and meaningful areas to the school community.

Thank you, Chairman, for sponsoring this important legislation incorporating *SurveyWorks* data that measure school climate into the performance evaluation of school districts and individual public schools. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.