

To: Members of the House Education Committee

From: Amy Herlihy, Volunteer with RI Moms Demand Action

Re: **Support:** H 8102

Date: April 3, 2024

My name is Amy Herlihy and I live in Rep Boylan's district. Tonight I am writing in whole hearted support of H 8102, which is sponsored by Rep Boylan, and would update the current school drill requirement and policy in Rhode Island.

In addition to being a volunteer with RI Moms Demand Action, I am a Speech-Language Pathologist for the Pawtucket School Department. In this capacity I have witnessed, all too often, how traumatic and stressful school drills can be on children- and especially on children with special needs. Each year the schools I have worked in complete 10 fire drills. Sometimes the fire drills take place throughout the year. During the winter months it is hard to understand the benefit of requiring hundreds of children to stand outside in the freezing cold for 10 minutes or more. Sometimes the fire drills all take place within the span of 1-2 weeks. Either way, these fire drills take up a lot of precious time for learning and can cause a lot of anxiety in children. For example, last year I worked with a girl who worried about a lot of things, including fire drills. She would often ask me, "are we going to have a fire drill today?"

Lock down drills are another safety drill that I've seen cause significant fear and worry in children. One of the first lock down drills I participated in was when I was treating a group of kids with the Occupational Therapist (OT). The kids cried a little during the drill but were seemingly able to move forward and complete their work. The next time the OT and myself tried to bring the kids to her room for a treatment session the kids cried as they recalled the lock down drill and said they didn't want to go into the room. They asked if there would be another lock down drill and if a bad guy would be coming into school? It took a few weeks before the kids felt really

comfortable with going into the treatment room again. It was heartbreaking to witness this. In my current position, I work with preschoolers and as you can imagine, it's hard for 4 year olds to understand why we are hiding at school and have to be silent. Tears are often shed by these little kids during and after the lockdowns.

I also want to highlight that I am in full support of school staff assessing and determining if children with special needs or a history of trauma should be exempt from these drills. During evacuation drills I have the privilege of walking .3 miles, each way, with autistic 4 year olds who are non-speaking and need maximum support to complete the evacuation drill. By their behavior and actions I can tell they aren't happy during the evacuations and that the walk is really hard for them. While I do my best to support their needs, we are often passed by many other classes, as we slowly make our way to the evacuation spot, only to turn around and have to walk back. It is not easy for children with significant special needs to participate in these drills and I don't think it is necessary for them to do this, either. In a true emergency, I am confident that their teachers and school staff will do everything they can to evacuate children with special needs safely.

This change in our current school drill requirement and policy is long overdue. It is in the best interest of our community to recognize and mitigate the stress and trauma that these drills cause our youth. Please pass this bill out of committee with recommendation for passage on the floor of the house.