

April 3, 2024

**Re: In Support Of H 8102- An Act Relating To Education -- School Emergency Drills Act**

Chairman McNamara, Vice chairs Noret and Kislak, and members of the House Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support H 8102- An Act Relating To Education - School Emergency Drills Act and our thanks to Representative Boylan and her esteemed co-sponsors for their introduction of this bill, which revise the quantity, schedule, and protocols for fire, evacuation, and crisis response drills in K-12 schools, aiming to enhance student safety. Additionally, it mandates the inclusion of trauma-informed approaches in planning and executing these drills.

The Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families (RICCF) is comprised of forty-three member organizations who provide and/or advocate for services and resources to support and strengthen families; to address policy and practice for behavioral and physical health, special education, juvenile justice, family and sexual violence, and to support and care for foster youth.. Members of RICCF operate at least six of the state's out of district school placements.

Emergency drills in schools can be highly stressful events for students, particularly those who have experienced trauma in their lives. Research has shown that trauma and collective worry experienced by school stakeholders increased following drills, with a 42% rise in anxiety/stress and 39% in depression, lasting at least 90 days and spanning across diverse school districts and tactics.<sup>1</sup> Notably, when children experience trauma leading to chronic stress or fear in early childhood, they are more vulnerable to behaviors associated with anxiety, inhibiting their ability to engage in higher-level thinking.<sup>2</sup> While drills are not meant to cause trauma, this research highlights the need for regulations and guidelines to ensure drills are conducted in a manner that minimizes harm and promotes safety.

In discussing this bill with members who serve and teach kids with severe traumas and psychological needs through the RICCF Education Committee, We recommend:

- A notification system that announces drills to parents or caregivers in advance, ensuring that it is explicitly stated that these are drills. This transparency can alleviate unnecessary anxiety for both students and parents while maintaining the effectiveness of the safety exercises.
- Drills should be age-appropriate and trauma-informed. Tailoring these exercises to the developmental stages and emotional needs of our children can make a significant difference in how they perceive and respond to emergency situations.
- Parents or caregivers should be notified ahead of time regarding reunification

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<sup>1</sup> ElSherief, M., Saha, K., Gupta, P. *et al.* Impacts of school shooter drills on the psychological well-being of American K-12 school communities: a social media study. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* **8**, 315 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00993-6>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

locations in case of an emergency. This proactive approach ensures that families have a clear plan in place and can act swiftly and confidently should the need arise.

Trauma-informed practices are vital for creating environments that meet the needs of these students. By integrating such practices into emergency drills, schools can minimize potential re-traumatization and promote a sense of safety and well-being among all students.

Moving forward, it is crucial that we consider the impacts of emergency drills, especially those involving simulated active shooter scenarios. The provision in Bill 8102 which prohibits mandatory participation of students, teachers, and staff in such simulations during school hours, acknowledges the potential psychological impact of these drills. This provision strikes a balance between maintaining safety preparedness and sensitivity to the emotional needs of our school community.

The Commission's input on trauma-informed practices, the provisions on active shooter simulations, and the research on the impacts of emergency drills underscore the critical need for comprehensive and evidence-based approaches to school safety. By prioritizing the mental and emotional well-being of our students, teachers, and staff, we can create safer and more supportive learning environments

For all of these reasons, we urge your support of H8102. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tanja Kubas-Meyer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Tanja Kubas-Meyer  
Executive Direc