

5165

Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Karen Potkul, I live in Narragansett and I work as a Teacher Assistant at North Kingstown High School. I have been in education for seven years and I really enjoy working with students. It is incredibly rewarding to see a student accomplish goals and objectives and see that they are proud of themselves. I love helping a struggling student feel proud of the progress they are making.

However, I have witnessed increasing behavioral issues among students. Some lash out at teachers and assistants—scratching, biting, and kicking. Others put objects in their mouths or climb onto tables and desks, disrupting not only their own learning but that of their classmates. In open school environments, these disruptions can impact multiple classrooms at once. While it's a small percentage of students exhibiting these extreme behaviors, it only takes one incident to create a significant disruption, sometimes even frightening other students. I fear these repeated disturbances have a lasting psychological impact on their peers.

There are not enough resources to adequately address these challenges. We can remove them from the classroom, but that does not address the root cause or the real problem. School psychologists and social workers—when available—have extremely limited time with students, often just 10-15 minutes per session. In contrast, private mental health professionals typically spend an hour or more with their clients. I have never seen a student, even those engaged in extreme and potentially self-injurious behavior, spend an hour with an employee of the school department with a background in mental health.

I am not blaming the student, and I am not blaming the mental health professionals employed by the schools who, in my opinion, are stretched way too thin to have a meaningful impact.

Covid was hard on all of us, but it was especially hard on our children. Kids struggle with mental health for various reasons. Through it, they need to be supported by mental health professionals. I can usually deescalate a student and get them back to the classroom to learn, but I cannot address the underlying problem or the root cause of the extremely disruptive behavior. Now, we have more self-contained classrooms than ever before, and those classrooms have students with extreme diagnosis and extreme behaviors. It seems like the number of students with behavior issues is increasing each year.

I do not know exactly how to fix this for all the students that are suffering. However, I know that we are not doing enough to constitute a good faith effort at addressing the problem. It is our responsibility, our duty, to do what we can to address this crisis. This is why it is critical to pass H5165 to ensure these issues receive focus and attention and the clear, enforceable policies that these issues deserve. Please pass this bill so we do everything we can to give students what they need.

Thank you.