



**Testimony Re: House Bill 7397-- An Act Relating to Education --The Education Equity and Property Tax Relief Act – Mental Health Providers in Schools**

**House Finance Committee**

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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 7397 and thank Representative Karen Alzate for sponsoring it. This bill would establish a categorical educational aid program to fund the hiring and retention of school social workers, school psychologists, and other school-based mental and behavioral health professionals for three years.

Mental health influences children’s health and behavior at home, school, and in the community. Untreated mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk of suicide.

In Rhode Island,

- In 2022, more than one in four (28.7%) of children ages three to 17 had a mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem.
- More than half (59%) of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had difficulty obtaining needed care.

According to the *2023 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey*,

- More than a third (36%) of Rhode Island high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for more than two weeks during the past year.
- Nine percent of high school students reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year.

Nationally, children and youth were experiencing mental health challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic, but since the onset of the pandemic, the number of children experiencing anxiety and depression has increased. As a result, in 2022, the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Rhode Island Council of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hasbro Children’s Hospital, and Bradley Hospital joined together to declare the Rhode Island State of Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. One of the six policy recommendations issued by the group included implementing sustainable funding for effective models of school-based mental health care with clinical strategies.

**In the U.S., students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health than community mental health centers. This is especially true in school districts in areas with a high concentration of poverty.**

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 500 to 700 students per school psychologist. The School Social Work Association of America recommends a ratio of 250 students to one social worker. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) estimates that as of October 1, 2022, the average ratio was 712 students per school psychologist and 419 students per school social worker, well over the recommended ratio. **Rhode Island would need an additional 222 mental health professionals to offer students the proper support to address their mental health needs.**

Feelings of safety and connection with the school are the most important school climate factors for promoting and protecting students' mental and emotional well-being. Social workers and other school-based mental health professionals are essential in creating and sustaining positive school climates. They can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement, and career preparation, and lower suspension rates and other disciplinary incidents.

Last year, the General Assembly made an important change to increase access to school-based mental health providers by allowing school social workers and certified school psychologists to be eligible for federal Medicaid reimbursement for the mental health services they provide to students. We need to continue this momentum.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports efforts to increase the hiring of new mental health professionals in schools. These investments will help ensure our children's safety and physical and emotional well-being.

We would also recommend one change to the language of this bill. We would recommend allowing school districts that are currently using *ESSER* dollars to pay for school-based mental health professionals to maintain those positions using categorical funds. This addition will prevent unintentionally penalizing districts that used time-limited *ESSER* dollars to hire school-based mental health professionals.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.