



Sila Yang

Youth Leader

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Good evening house representatives, my name is Sila Yang. I'm a student from Pilgrim High School and I'm a youth advocate from ARISE. I'm here on behalf of House Bill 7545, which is to ensure that every public school from kindergarten to twelfth grade has one full-time certified school social worker.

In a research study for ESSER done by the ANNENBURG institute at Brown University, studies have shown that Rhode Island has one of the worst counselor-to-student ratios pre-pandemic, with 1 counselor to every 392 students. What we're asking is for 1 counselor for every 250 students with \$2 million as a budget for the year 2025 by the General Assembly.

Back in 2019, I struggled with my own mental health. Though my grades were outstanding, I had a lot of inner conflict with myself. When the school counselor at my middle school caught on, I was just thrown into a hospital for over a week. Coming from a culture that views mental health as taboo, I was an outcast to my family. Before I was sent to the hospital, I begged for the school counselor not to tell my family because I knew that I was about to face repercussions.

Imagine your parent, someone you're supposed to confide with, tells other family members that you're basically a mental lunatic. And imagine having that relative telling you that "oh, you don't need therapy, you just need to study harder.". And imagine instead of being comforted by your parent, they compare to that relative's son, and you see your father giving their son a high-five because he's doesn't have to face the guilt, the shame, and the disgust that you do.

And I'm not the only one-I've had a friend of mine seek out the school's therapist. And you want to know what they did? They googled how to help my friend. And this therapist was apparently "certified in her job". And I get it, Google isn't an inherently bad search engine. But when in front of a student who's having a mental breakdown, you do realize how unprofessional that is?

What I'm trying to get here is that if the home isn't a safe place for a student, school should be their next option. School should be a place where a student feels safe and confided with. School should have a space where a student can go to a trusted and certified adult who can help them with their problems-or at the very least provide them with resources. Which is why I'm urging the committee to support House Bill 7545. Because I don't want to see any more students-any more young people feel as if they'll be tossed to the side due to issues they can't control.

Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony tonight and considering supporting the mental health of students in Rhode Island.