

FINANCE COMMITTEE  
STATE HOUSE  
PROVIDENCE, RI 02903

APRIL 13, 2024

**Re: Testimony in Support of House bill 7545** titled “The Education Equity and Property Tax Relief Act”

Dear Chair Abney and the members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Danielle Veglia from Providence. I am a Social Work student at Rhode Island College, a member of the National Association of Social Workers Rhode Island Chapter, a member and founder of the social justice group, Social Workers Save Lives, but above all I am a mom.

I am testifying in strong support of House bill #7545, because Social Workers Save Lives!

This bill is pivotal to ensuring schools have enough social workers to help students receive the resources they need to succeed academically. Social workers bring an extensive, multifaceted set of skills to school settings. Schools rely on social workers to address complex student and family needs, as well as respond to crises that impact the school community. School social workers help to maintain a safe and supportive environment within the school through prevention programs and outreach to at-risk-youth. Because access to school social workers is imperative to the success of students in school, the NASW recommends a ratio of one social worker for every 250 students. Having an appropriate social worker-to-student ratio allows teachers to focus on educating students and affords students the opportunity to get proper attention to their needs.

According to RI Kids Count, in Rhode Island, one in five (19%) children ages 6 to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem and one in ten (10%) has significant functional impairment. In 2021, only about one in five (22%) of Rhode Island students reported receiving the help they needed when feeling anxious or depressed. Leading to 467 teens ages 13 to 19 being admitted to the emergency department after a suicide attempt and 334 being hospitalized.

There is no denying the data, Social Workers Save Lives, but more importantly they save our children's lives. As a mom who has two daughters that have struggled with various mental, social, and behavioral diagnosis, I have a firsthand perspective at the importance of having a proportionate number of social workers available in our school systems, and the detrimental harm caused to our children, when lack thereof. I never knew how bad things were with my oldest until the night our oldest came to us hysterical and visibly shaken, saying she needed to go to the hospital, because she was fearful that she was going to hurt herself, more than she already had. We had no idea she was self-harming at all! Despite all our attentiveness and efforts, we didn't see what was happening with our daughter. Coming to the reality that our daughter had previously tried taking her life, but her attempts had failed, is something that will forever haunt

me. That night we had to have our daughter admitted to the hospital. The process is something I wish no child or parent had to experience. Watching the doors close, locking them in, and having to leave your child when they're in their worst state ever. To finally being allowed to visit them, finding they are not allowed access to things we wouldn't think to be harmful, to watching as they are escorted to the bathroom, and seeing that they have no privacy as they are monitored 24/7. The worst part of all is having to leave them again and watching them cry for you. It is a gut-wrenching pain that I wouldn't wish on anyone. The realization that there is nothing you can do for your child at that moment is a devastatingly helpless feeling. It makes you question what you should have been able to do to prevent these circumstances and it has you feeling like you have failed your child. Not long after, our youngest daughter started going through her own struggles. However, thanks to the attentiveness of a couple of school social workers, and because of their direct involvement, we were able to collaborate, and come up with plans to get her the help and resources she needed, together.

Because we were made AWARE there was something going on, we knew what to look for. It took a lot, and we still had some very scary moments, but we were supported. More importantly, our daughter was seen, she was heard, she was helped and guided, and in the end because of the support of two school social workers, she was saved!

Because Social Workers Save Lives! And guess what, members of the committee, you can too! I trust in you to consider the facts and know that you will consider what's at stake here, the lives of our children, and our future.

For all the reasons I've forementioned, I urge you to vote in support of House bill #7545 and urge passage of these bills as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak today.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Danielle Veglia

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