



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

ONE UNION STATION  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903  
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

**Testimony Re: House Bill 7545 - AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION:  
THE EDUCATION EQUITY AND PROPERTY TAX RELIEF ACT – Social  
Workers in Schools**

**House Finance Committee**

**April 30, 2024**

**Jessica Vega, Senior Policy Analyst**

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 support for House Bill 7545 and thank Representative Shallcross Smith for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Kazarian, Vella-Wilkinson, Casimiro, Alzate, Cruz, McNamara, Tanzi, Hull, and Cotter for co-sponsoring. This bill would require all public schools, in grades kindergarten through twelve, to have at least one full-time certified school social worker for every 250 students and provide for an appropriation by the General Assembly of \$2 million in the budget for Fiscal Year 2025.

School social workers provide mental health support in school and are experts in addressing students' social and emotional needs. They often are the primary mental health professionals for students and are accessible to students and their families, offering crucial support in identifying and starting interventions for students' mental health wellness.

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

In the U.S. and Rhode Island, the impact of COVID-19 has increased the mental health needs of students. 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 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 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.

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. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.