

Good afternoon Judiciary Committee,

My name is Andrea Gonzalez, and I am a Program Manager at Young Voices, and a Social Work student at RIC. I am here today to testify against Bill H5262, which would add school superintendents, central office officials, school principals, and all other school employees to the definition of a “public official” for purposes of the criminal prohibition against making threats to public officials.

As an adult who works with youth, I wholeheartedly believe in the safety of both adults and youth as we work together. However, this bill is not promoting the safety of all people, but rather allowing for already existing disparities to become even greater. Research has shown us time and time again that the school to prison pipeline is not only real, but perpetrated by school staff easily. It has also shown us that folks of color are more likely to be suspended, seen as threatening, and believed to be harmful. I can see this bill causing youth who are already harmed by generational trauma, racial disparities, and painful misconceptions, unfair punishments. The vague language of the bill can lead for easy misunderstandings, due to differences in culture, language, or experience, to turn into criminal offenses.

As adults, we should prioritize the safety of youth and staff by ensuring that we are utilizing trauma-informed practices, de-escalation techniques, and having the appropriate staff handle situations that we might not be equipped to handle ourselves. We can do this by prioritizing having more social workers in schools, participating in trainings to dismantle the school to prison pipeline, and listening to the voices of the young people that we impact daily.

I urge you to vote no on this bill, the lives of our young people depend on it.

Thank you for your time and consideration today.

Andrea Gonzalez