

February 4, 2025

To: Chair Craven & the Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

Re: H-5262

I submit this written testimony in opposition to the proposed legislation which aims to “*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’ [...] and charge those found guilty with a felony and imprisonment of up to five years.*”

First of all, schools already have policies and procedures at their disposal that address threatening speech and/or behavior. Students can be sent to detention, given in-school suspension, sent out-of-school for suspension, or expelled. In the event of a dangerous or escalated situation, school staff members can simply contact their local police department. The Providence Public School Department – the largest district in the state – has had officers in their buildings for at least a decade now. If these well-established policies and procedures are proving ineffective at deterring ‘threatening’ behaviors, then that - *in and of itself* - is a clue that school leaders and other stakeholders should return to the drawing board. While threatening language and conduct from students and their families is problematic, we should understand that these behaviors do not occur in a vacuum. We need to understand that these behaviors are an outgrowth and mirror of a deeper institutional logic.

The United States government – at both federal and state levels – has subscribed to a paradigm of neoliberal capitalism since the 1970s. Consequently, the public sector (i.e. welfare, public transportation, public education, etc.) is routinely placed on the chopping block for ‘austerity cuts’ while *also* subjected to increased surveillance and punishment from the penal arm of the state.¹ The government reappropriates public funding for the well-being of the masses to punitive forces in the name of ‘law and order’ or ‘safety’. In essence: the United States government has waged an all-out war on the masses of people. This is made abundantly clear by the facts that there are many schools with more police officers than counselors inside of them²; and that the government spends 10x more money on the military than it does for education³. At the highest echelons of wealth and government, this is a society more interested in punishing people than helping them. Punishment is not only a business model in America, but a way of life.

The proposed law grapples with forms of interpersonal violence as entirely divorced from the structure of poverty that creates it. Mahatma Gandhi astutely argued that “the worst form of violence is poverty”. This does not mean that individual violence is acceptable. Rather, it means that personal violence is *understandable* in relation to structures of violence. The cost of living continues to increase faster than the average wage, health insurers are denying more and more claims, and civil/human rights are becoming relics of the past. Students, their families, *and* teachers in urban areas are struggling financially – and that frustration is rearing its ugly head in the schools.

¹ See generally: Loic Wacquant (2004) “*Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*”

² See article: <https://publications.csba.org/california-school-news/april-2019/report-finds-police-officers-outnumber-health-staff-in-schools/>

³ See article by Peter Gelling (2023) “*The US spent \$877 billion on military in 2022, a new report says — more than 10 times federal education spending*”. *Business Insider*

A recent survey shows that burnout and low salaries are ranked as the top concerns teachers have⁴ with their jobs, *followed by* matters of student discipline. In other words, the main concerns that teachers have are with the government, and their administrative/leadership teams that overwork, underpay, and undervalue them. However, the sponsors of this bill – who are **all** white politicians representing richer and whiter districts [i.e. West Warwick, Portsmouth, North Kingstown, etc.] bypass these issues and jump straight to matters of student discipline. Why? **Because the sponsors of this bill do not really care about school teachers, either.** The sponsors of this bill are attempting a double maneuver: protect teachers *just enough* to be considered ‘public officials’ for the sake of enforcing this law – but not consider them ‘public officials’ when it is time to increase their wages or decrease their workload. In this equation, teachers are mere pawns; a means to accomplish a greater end of dismantling public education.

The message of **H-5262** is that students and their families are the biggest threat to the well-being of educators, rather than those at the top of the hierarchy. The students, their families, and teachers in urban areas are all on edge – and some schools have the atmosphere of a powder keg on the brink of explosion – and this bill aims to stoke the flames. It is the classic divide and conquer strategy: keep the students and their families at war with school staff and vice versa, until everyone forgets that the common enemy of *everyone* is the neoliberal capitalist culture and government.

We must understand the full gravity and totality of this bill. Black and Latinx students are vastly overrepresented in arrests in Providence⁵. These criminal records follow students well beyond the classroom, thus creating barriers to future employment prospects, and increasing the likelihood of ‘recidivism.’ The proposed law, although sponsored by representatives from richer and whiter districts, *would have more dire consequences for poorer and blacker districts by kicking their school-to-prison pipelines into overdrive.*

In the interest of building a more just and humane world, I urge you to oppose **H-5262**.

Respectfully Submitted,



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⁴ See article: <https://cea.org/burnout-low-salaries-student-behavior-top-list-of-teachers-concerns-in-new-cea-survey/>

⁵ See article:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b6c61467e3c3ac8b9c44952/t/5fdaaa78d43a93197f77e87/1608166120159/CYCLE+Discipline+Report+Exec+Summary+Dec+2020+%281%29.pdf>