



Testimony Re: House Bill 5396- Increase School Social Workers
House Finance Committee
April 26, 2023
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Mr. Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice our strong support for House Bill 5396 and thank Representative Kazarian for sponsoring and Representatives Shallcross Smith, Fogarty, O'Brien, Morales, McNamara, Kislak, Hull, Tanzi, and Felix 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 two hundred fifty (250) students and provide for an appropriation by the General Assembly of \$2 million in the budget for Fiscal Year 2024.

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 Rhode Island,

- One in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 have a diagnosable mental health condition.
- One in ten (9.8%) has significant functional impairment.
- More than one-third (36%) of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had difficulty obtaining needed care.

According to the *2019 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey*,

- Seventy-six percent of Rhode Island high school students reported having at least one day in the past month when their mental health was not good.
- About one in three (32%) Rhode Island high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks that they stopped doing some normal activities.
- One in seven (15%) reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year.

According to the *2022 SurveyWorks* results,

- Fifty-five percent of Rhode Island students in grades 3-5 report that stress has interfered with their ability to participate in school.

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 includes 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.

