



Testimony Re: House Bill 6053 Relating to The Paul W. Crowley Rhode Island Student Success Investment Initiative

House Education Committee

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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 elements of House Bill 6053 and thank Representative Sanchez for sponsoring and Representatives Morales, Caldwell, Slater, and Boylan for co-sponsoring. This bill would direct the basic education program to incorporate instruction on the connection between alcohol and substance abuse and substance use disorder, and mental health, require all strategic plans include strategies to implement programs and provide additional mental health services for students, including increased and guaranteed access to mental health professionals at every school for all students in each school, and require the department of elementary and secondary education to prepare an annual report on the overall status of student mental health in schools throughout the state.

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.

rikids@rikidscount.org
www.rikidscount.org

- One in seven (15%) reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year.

According to the 2022 *SurveyWorks* results,

- Sixty four percent of Rhode Island students in grades 6-12 report that stress has interfered with their ability to participate in school.

While mental health challenges for youth existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in anxiety and depression among children and youth since the onset of the pandemic. These challenges have hit Children of Color and LGBTQ+ children especially hard. In April 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 a Rhode Island State of Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health.

Because children and youth spend a large part of their days in school, their experiences during the school day can significantly impact their mental health. Beyond promoting mental wellness for all students, schools can also provide intervention and treatment for students with additional mental health needs. 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. Providing mental health services in schools removes student access barriers (e.g., transportation, scheduling conflicts, and stigma). Schools can give school-based services and refer youth to more intensive resources in the community when needed. They can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement, career preparation, lower suspension rates, and other disciplinary incidents. Equally important is the way we track the outcomes.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports efforts to increase student access to mental health services and professionals in schools. These investments will help ensure our children's safety and physical and emotional well-being. We also support the proposed annual report on the overall status of student mental health in schools throughout the state. This report will help inform future policies and best practices on supporting students' mental health and help to ensure that all students in every school in Rhode Island has access to important mental health services.

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.