



**Testimony Re: H-7058 Education, School Committees and Superintendents, Requirement to Provide Transportation Services to Students**

**House Health, Education & Welfare Committee**

**January 20, 2016**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports House Bill 7058 which would require that school districts provide transportation services for all students who live two or more miles from school.

Students who are frequently absent from school miss critical academic and social learning opportunities and are at risk of disengagement from school, academic failure, and dropping out. Regardless of the reason for absence, students who miss school are more likely to fall behind academically and engage in risky behaviors.

We know that there are many reasons for chronic absence. These reasons relate to the school, family, and community and include poverty, lack of access to health care, concerns about safety, lack of interest in school, student illness and disability, and work and family responsibilities.

We also know that lack of affordable and reliable transportation is a barrier to regular attendance for many students. Districts that do not provide adequate transportation to school and instead expect students to rely on their own transportation, walk long distances, or pay for public transportation that is unaffordable to families with limited incomes are setting up an additional barrier to students beyond the other challenges they face.

The bill that is before you today raises the issue of high school students that have to walk to school or find their own alternative mode of transportation if they live more than two miles from school. That is an excessive distance that it is difficult to imagine when we think about our own kids.

Last year, the Providence School Board changed their policy to address this issue, reducing the walking distance from 3.0 miles to 2.5 miles for high school students and this year they further reduced the distance to 2.0 miles. This change was made after many student activists called attention to this issue, in particular through the "Walk in Our Shoes Challenge," which invited civic and elected leaders to accompany one high school student on her daily journey from Smith Hill to Classical High School.

We recommend that both the state and individual districts look at current policies regarding which students receive transportation services and determine if current services are adequate or are a barrier to student attendance. We owe it to our students to ensure that they have safe routes to school and adequate transportation to get there and believe that putting this in statute would ensure that buses and bus passes are not a target for budget cuts when there are district budget shortfalls.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.