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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5233 Relating to Education- Health and Safety of Pupils.**

**House Education Committee**

**February 24, 2021**

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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 House Bill 5233. This bill would provide students attending public schools enrolled in grades K-12 with a student's bill of rights prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, economic status or mental, physical, developmental or sensory disabilities.

Many of us understand that discrimination is detrimental to student educational success. Although every student in Rhode Island has the right to a safe and discrimination free education, there are still incidents when equity and student safety are compromised. The adoption of the proposed bill will provide a clear expectation that discrimination is not permitted in Rhode Island schools.

Students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by discrimination in schools. In Rhode Island, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are more likely to be suspended than their White peers, despite the fact that there is no evidence that these students have more serious patterns of rule breaking. Students with disabilities also are more likely to be suspended than their peers.

Discrimination can also be seen in school climate and the impact on bullying. Bullying incidents among students create a climate of fear and disrespect that can negatively impact student learning. Bullying behavior is a serious issue that is experienced by children and youth of all ages.

Specific student subgroups populations are at increased risk of being bullied, including youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). In 2017, 31% of Rhode Island high school students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) reported being bullied on school property.

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Students with disabilities are overrepresented within the bullying dynamic, whether as children who have bullied, children who have been bullied, or children who have both bullied and have been bullied. In 2015, in Rhode Island, 25% of high school students who had been bullied on school property reported having a long-term emotional problem or learning disability.

Informing students of their rights is one of many important steps to improve school climate. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT encourages the voices of students and families to be included in all efforts to improve school climate and combat discrimination in schools.

No student should be discriminated against. Discrimination impedes a student's ability to learn. It is important to protect these rights for every student. While there are already laws protecting various classes from discrimination, the proposed student bill of rights would provide another mechanism for ensuring that all students are informed of their rights and that these rights are protected.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.