



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7485 Re: School Resource Officers
House Finance Committee**

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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 **opposition** to **House Bill 7485** which would make the School Resource Officer Categorical Aid permanent.

School climate is the character and quality of life within a school building and is defined by several indicators including the relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community; safety; facilities; the availability of school-based health supports; discipline policies; and academic outcomes. A positive school climate promotes social, mental, emotional, behavioral, and learning success while also ensuring physical and social safety. Research suggests **the presence of law enforcement worsens school climates**, increases disciplinary actions, and disproportionately impacts the academic outcomes of Students of Color.

In the U.S., in the 2017-2018 school year, 65% of middle schools and 75% of high schools had a School Resource Officer (SRO), while another 15% of schools had other forms of law enforcement present including parole, probation, truancy, security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. SROs can serve many functions in schools including enforcement of student discipline. We do not currently have complete, up-to-date, and accurate information on the number and use of SROs in Rhode Island schools, but legislation has been proposed that would require that RIDE collect and publicly report data on the number of SROs in each school disaggregate data on the use of force against students, student arrests, and referrals to law enforcement or courts.

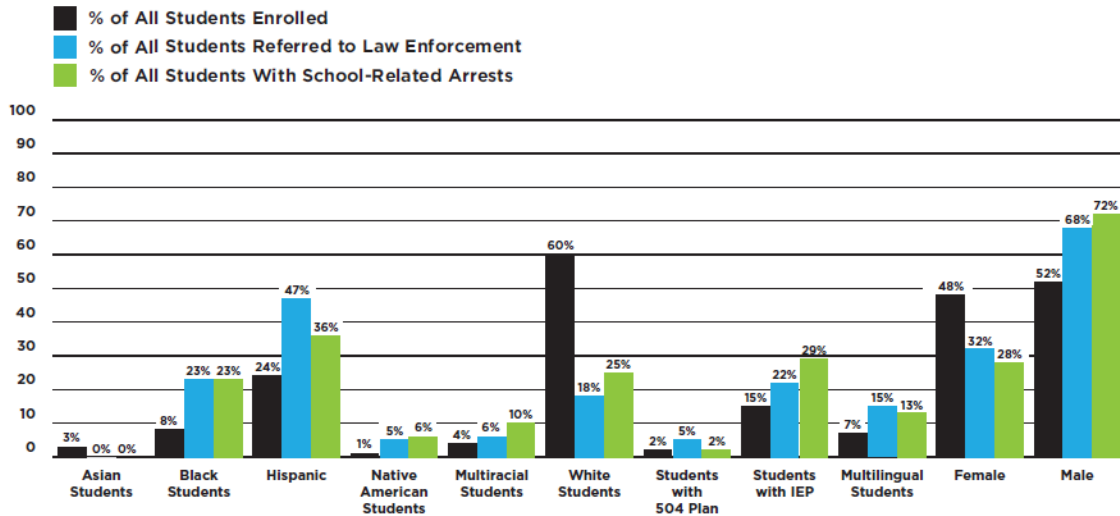
In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year (the most recent available year),

- Black students represented 8% of the student population but represented 23% of students referred to law enforcement and 23% of students with school-related arrests.
- Hispanic students represented 24% of the student population but represented 47% of students referred to law enforcement and 36% of students with school-related arrests.
- White students represented 60% of students enrolled but represented only 18% of students referred to law enforcement and 25% of students with school-related arrests.
- Students with Individual Education Plans represented 15% of the student population but represented 22% of students referred to law enforcement and 29% of students with school-related arrests.

Student arrest and juvenile detention increases a student's likelihood of future arrests, decreases the likelihood of completing high school and may result in long-lasting consequences including restricted eligibility for federal

grants and student loans and barriers to college enrollment and employment.

**Bias in School Discipline by Race/Ethnicity, Special Education Status,
English Proficiency, and Gender, Rhode Island, 2015-2016**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016 school year.

Restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive disciplinary practices are effective approaches for addressing student behavior and help to create positive student-teacher relationships, improve students' sense of belonging, build safe schools, and increase academic outcomes.

Enclosed is our recent report, [Policies and Practices Supporting Student-Centered Learning in Rhode Island: School Climate](#). This report uses an equity lens to look at policies, practices, and measures of school climate, including student mental and behavioral health and suggests actions Rhode Island can take to ensure that all students, particularly Students of Color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and Multilingual Learners, are in schools that prioritize strong relationships between students and educators and promote excellent, equitable learning while also ensuring student safety and emotional well-being. We strongly support efforts to increase the hiring of new mental health professionals in schools because these investments will help ensure the safety, physical and emotional well-being of our children.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.