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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7546 Re: School Social Workers
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 **strong support** for **House Bill 7546** and thank Representative Kazarian for introducing this important bill and Representatives O'Brien, Alzate, Casimiro, Carson, Solomon, Henries, Amore, and Cassar for co-sponsoring. This bill would provide \$2 million of funding to support the hiring of new school social workers.

Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in 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 for suicide.

In Rhode Island,

- One in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has 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 a problem obtaining needed care.

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

- Seventy-six percent of high school students reported having at least one day in the past month where 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 2021 *SurveyWorks* results,

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

In the U.S. and in Rhode Island, the impact of COVID 19 has increased the mental health needs of students. Last month 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**. 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. In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year, there were **685 students for every school social worker**, far above the recommended ratio.

Feelings of safety and connection with school are the most important school climate factors for promoting and protecting student mental and emotional well-being. Social workers and other school-based mental health professionals have an important role to play in creating and sustaining positive school climates and can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement and career preparation, and lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents.

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, differently-abled students 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.

This week during National Mental Health Awareness Week, we strongly support efforts to increase the hiring of new mental health professionals in schools. These investments will help ensure the safety, physical and emotional well-being of our children.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.