



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**  
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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7848 Re: Alternatives to Suspensions**  
**House Education Committee**  
**April 11, 2022**  
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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 7848. This bill would require school districts to provide alternative disciplinary approaches to student conduct such as restorative justice practices, peer mediation, counseling, and tiered interventions to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions by January 1, 2023. We want to thank Representative Ranglin-Vassell for sponsoring this bill and thank the co-sponsors Representatives Tanzi, Amore, and Donovan.

Effective school disciplinary practices promote a safe and respectful school climate, support learning, and address the causes of student misbehavior. Suspension usually does not deter students from exhibiting negative behaviors and may reinforce negative behavior patterns. Suspended students are more likely than their peers to experience academic failure, juvenile justice system involvement, disengagement from school, isolation from teachers and peers, and dropping out of school.

We are encouraged by the efforts of the General Assembly, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and individual school districts have made to reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions and encourage the use of alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Despite these efforts, the percentage of out-of-school suspensions for non-violence offenses remains persistent. During the 2019-2020 school year there were 13,803 suspensions and 44% of these (6,076) were out-of-school suspensions. Half of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses, such as insubordination/disrespect, disorderly conduct, obscene/abusive language, alcohol/drug/tobacco offenses, and electronic devices/technology offenses.



**Out-of-School Suspensions by Infraction, Rhode Island, 2019-2020**

| TYPE OF INFRACTION*            | #     | %   | TYPE OF INFRACTION              | #            | %  |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----|---------------------------------|--------------|----|
| Fighting                       | 1,328 | 22% | Obscene/Abusive Language        | 266          | 4% |
| Insubordination/Disrespect     | 1,020 | 17% | Arson/Larceny/Robbery/Vandalism | 163          | 3% |
| Assault of Student or Teacher  | 941   | 15% | Weapon Possession               | 146          | 2% |
| Disorderly Conduct             | 834   | 14% | Other Offenses                  | 93           | 2% |
| Harassment/Intimidation/Threat | 646   | 11% | Electronic Devices/Technology   | 52           | 1% |
| Alcohol/Drug/Tobacco Offenses  | 587   | 10% | Attendance Offenses             | 0            | 0% |
|                                |       |     | <b>Total</b>                    | <b>6,076</b> |    |

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019-2020 school year.

\*Harassment offenses include hazing and hate crimes. Assault offenses include sexual assault.

## **Disparities by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity**



### **Disparities in School Discipline by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity, Rhode Island, 2019-2020**

|   | <b>% OF STUDENTS ENROLLED</b> | <b>% OF SUSPENSIONS</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Students Receiving Special Education Services | 17%                           | 33%                     |
| Asian/Pacific Islander Students+              | 3%                            | 2%                      |
| Black Students                                | 9%                            | 12%                     |
| Hispanic Students                             | 27%                           | 33%                     |
| Multiracial                                   | 5%                            | 6%                      |
| Native American Students                      | 1%                            | 1%                      |
| White Students                                | 55%                           | 46%                     |

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019-2020 school year. % suspensions includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions. +Data for Asian students is not disaggregated by ethnic group. National research shows large academic disparities across Asian ethnic groups. Detailed data by district is available at [www.ride.ri.gov](http://www.ride.ri.gov)

In Rhode Island, during the 2019-2020 school year, students receiving special education services were suspended disproportionately. Students with disabilities represent 17% of the student population but represented 33% of suspensions. Students of color were also suspended disproportionately. Black students represent 9% of the student population but represented 12% of suspensions. Hispanic students represent 27% of the student population but represented 33% of suspensions.

### **Suspensions in the early grades**

Of all disciplinary actions during the 2019-2020 school year, 9% (1,230) involved elementary school students (kindergarten-5th grade) and 69% of these suspensions were out-of-school suspensions. Kindergarteners received 109 disciplinary actions, including 93 out-of-school suspensions.

Suspensions in the early grades are more likely when teachers believe the resources and supports available to them are inadequate to meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors. Large class sizes, inadequate student-teacher ratios, and lack of school resources to help teachers manage challenging behaviors are associated with increased suspensions. Mental health consultation is an intervention that works with teachers and families to reduce student's challenging behaviors, improve student-teacher relationships, and prevent suspensions. As of 2018, approximately 16 states limit the use of suspension in the early grades.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts that improve school climate, decrease the use of suspensions, and provide resources to school districts that help ensure that schools are safe and secure places that are conducive to learning and that investments are made in school mental health professionals who can address trauma and the mental health conditions that can impact a student's health and behavior at school.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on this issue over the past several years and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.