

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 8310 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 8310** which would require a minimum of two School Resource Officers (SRO) in every public school and would make the SRO Categorical Aid permanent.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank the House of Representatives for passing House Bill 6649 which would require the Rhode Island Department of Education to coordinate with the Rhode Island Department of the Attorney General to annually collect and publicly report data concerning the number of SROs in each school district, the use of force against students, student arrests, referrals to law enforcement or courts, and type of disciplinary action taken by SROs, and to disaggregate this data by age, grade, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and language status. **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT thanks you for your commitment to using data to inform policy decisions.**

Rhode Island does not currently have complete, up-to-date, and accurate information on the number and use of SROs in all Rhode Island schools. National research suggests **the presence of law enforcement worsens school climates, increases disciplinary actions, and disproportionately impacts the academic outcomes of Students of Color.**

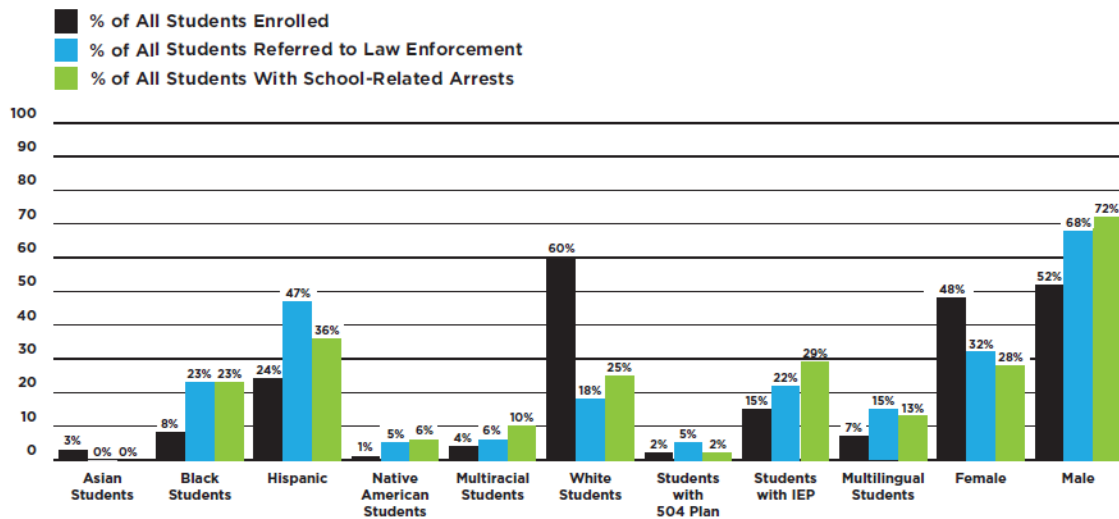
In the U.S., in the 2017-2018 school year, 65% of middle schools and 75% of high schools had an SRO, while another 15% of schools had other forms of law enforcement present including parole, probation, truancy, security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. SROs can serve many functions in schools including enforcement of student discipline.

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. A positive school climate promotes social, mental, emotional, behavioral, and learning success while also ensuring physical and social safety.

Enclosed is our 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 understand that the intention of this bill is to keep our children safe, and we want this too. 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. We are also extremely grateful for the work you have done to pass common-sense gun safety bills this session. **Both limiting access to guns and ensuring that students have access to needed mental health supports are important strategies for keeping our children, our schools, and our communities safe.**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony and for your work to make schools places where children are safe to learn, grow, and thrive.