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**Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2528 Re: Trauma Informed Schools Act  
Senate Judiciary Committee**

**April 12, 2022**

**Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director**

Madam Chair 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 Senate Bill 2528. This bill would establish the implementation of trauma-informed practices in schools throughout Rhode Island. We want to thank Chair Cano for her leadership and also thank the other sponsors in the Senate, Senators Bell, Quezada, and Calkin.

In the United States, nearly 35 million children have experienced at least one event that could lead to childhood trauma and about 72% of all children will have experienced at least one traumatic event, such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one, before the age of 18. In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health condition; one in 10 (9.8%) has a significant functional impairment.

Feelings of safety and connection with school can promote and protect student mental and emotional wellbeing. This bill would help students by increasing the ability of schools to recognize the signs of distress, identify trauma, and appropriately address behaviors rooted in trauma.

Adverse childhood experiences, toxic stress, and trauma can be experienced by any child at any point in their life. Children who experience loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, children living in poverty, children who experience or witness racism, children who witness or are a victim of violence, children removed from their families and placed into foster care, and children with disabilities often suffer trauma and attend schools that are unequipped to meet their mental health and emotional needs which can perpetuate or introduce new traumas.

According to the Institute of Educational Sciences, in the U.S., in September 2021, 86% of surveyed public schools encouraged existing school staff to address students' social, emotional, and mental well-being, yet only 59% offered professional development to train teachers to provide this type of assistance.

The Trauma-Informed Schools Act creates a universal approach designed to help students who have experienced trauma; however, the strategies and practices will benefit all children by creating positive school climates.

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

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts that improve school climate including the establishment of trauma-informed schools, training educators on how to effectively implement trauma-informed practices, reduction of suspensions, and investments to increase the number of mental health professionals in schools.

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. This bill is well-aligned with the recommendations in the report.

We appreciate being included in Senate Resolution 2529 which would establish a special legislative commission to study the impact of the trauma inflicted on children who are exposed to violence and would be happy to serve on this commission. We also urge passage of Senate Bill 2528 to establish the implementation of trauma-informed practices in schools throughout Rhode Island.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.