



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**

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## Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2578 Re: School Committee and Superintendents

Senate Education Committee

March 23, 2022

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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 **strong support** for **Senate Bill 2578** and thank Senator Cano for sponsoring this bill and Senators Kallman, Mack, Quezada, Murray, McCaffrey, and Goodwin for co-sponsoring. This bill 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 School Resource Officers in each school district, the use of force against students, including the type of force, student arrests with reason for the arrest, referrals to law enforcement or courts, and type of disciplinary action taken by School Resource Officers, and to disaggregate this data by age, grade, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and language status.

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. Rhode Island relies on federally generated data to report school-related arrests and student referrals to law enforcement. **This data is collected in inconsistent time intervals by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, and survey topics are subject to change.**

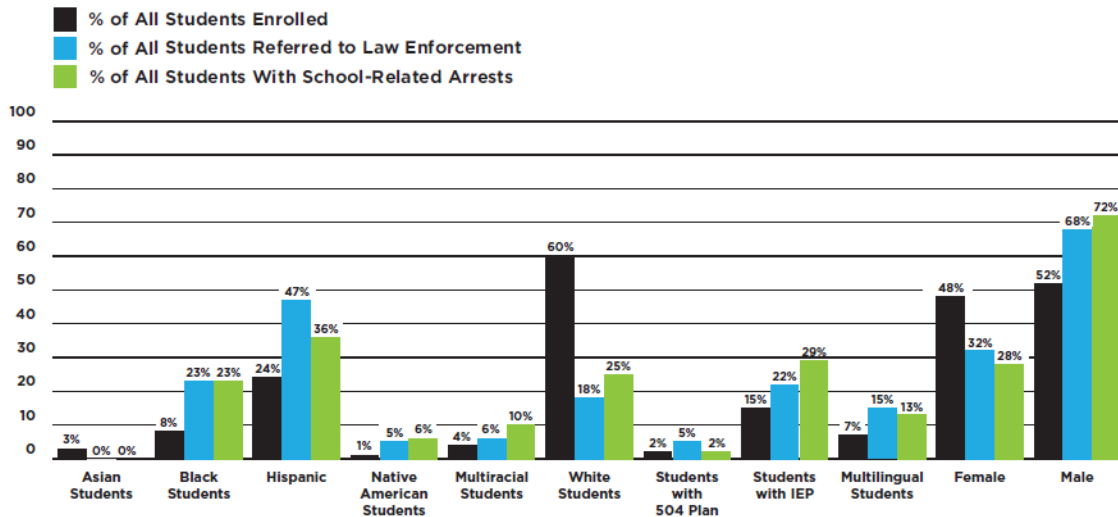
School climate is the character and quality of life within a school building and is defined by several indicators including the relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community; safety; facilities; the availability of school-based health supports; discipline policies; and academic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

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.

**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.

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. **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports efforts to collect annual data that can be used to inform policies focused on ending the practice of arresting and referring students to law enforcement for non-violent offenses.**

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, 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 bill is well-aligned with the recommendations in our report.

Thanks to the leadership of the General Assembly, Rhode Island is recognized as a national leader in our annual collection and reporting of student suspension data and the requirement for school districts to analyze this data for disparities. The data websites for the Rhode Island Department of Education have also been recognized for the public reporting of these discipline disparities. This proposed bill would expand this legislation and utilize existing tools to collect important school discipline practices involving law enforcement.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.