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Testimony Re: House Bill 5027- SurveyWorks
House Education 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 5027. This bill would incorporate *SurveyWorks*, and/or other future systems to measure school climate, into the performance evaluation of school districts and individual public schools.

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 is an essential element of an effective learning environment and can improve student and teacher attendance, student motivation to learn, academic achievement, and graduation rates.

In December 2020, Rhode Island Department of Education announced the new district accountability system which was established by the *Rhode Island Education Accountability Act* in 2019. The system uses six indicators including School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) which measures some elements of school climate like student and teacher absenteeism and suspension.

However, important school climate indicators such as student and family engagement, student sense of belonging, family support, teacher-student relationships, safety, and facilities are not included in this new accountability system.

School climate surveys collect important information about family, student, faculty, and staff perceptions and is an easy way to understand what is happening in a school. Using student surveys as part of an accountability system is not a new concept. Eight states (Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, and South Carolina) have included school climate or engagement surveys in their state accountability plan under the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Using school climate surveys in accountability systems creates a fuller picture of school performance

and creates incentives for district and school staff to enact policies and practices that support a positive school climate.

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.

School climate surveys offer an important opportunity to incorporate the experiences and voices of students, families, and educators into the accountability system and make changes in areas that are relevant and meaningful to the school community.

Thank you, Chairman, for your leadership in sponsoring this important legislation that would incorporate *SurveyWorks* data that measures school climate into the performance evaluation of school districts and individual public schools. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.