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January 23, 2022

Re: H6667 Trauma Informed Schools Act

Chairman Joseph McNamara
House Committee on Education
Rhode Island State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Dear Chairman McNamara and members of the Committee:

I am writing to support H6667, the *Trauma Informed Schools Act*. This bill will require the establishment and implementation of trauma-informed practices within all elementary and secondary education public schools throughout the state. It will ensure that Rhode Island schools will develop policies and procedures that are informed by the latest brain science on the impact of trauma and toxic stress on the developing child. It will help foster school- wide learning environments where all students and adults feel safe and supported. Utilizing evidence-based, trauma-informed and restorative strategies that will help all Educators impact and address children's behavior, resulting in improved learning environments. The one thing I would add to this bill is an expectation that one year after passage, and annually thereafter for a period of 3-5 years, progress on implementation be reported to the legislature.

Adoption Rhode Island is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting safety, permanency and a sense of belonging in foster and adopted children and families and vulnerable youth through direct services, education and advocacy. Our Child and Family Services programs serve many children and families across Rhode Island who are impacted by childhood trauma. We provide evidenced -based mental health services, educational advocacy and professional development offerings on child welfare and trauma -related topics. Many children we serve struggle in school, foster and adoptive families experience school-related challenges with the children in their care and the teachers we work with are often frustrated with issues and

behaviors that many of our children display in the classroom. Creating more trauma sensitive policies, practices and approaches in Rhode Island schools will help the foster and adopted children we serve. They will also provide a more helpful learning environment for all children and support the teachers who are struggling to meet the needs of children in their classrooms.

Childhood trauma is one of the most critical public health concerns for children today. Trauma and adversity in childhood raise the risk of numerous health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and mental illness in adulthood. Trauma in early childhood can result in disrupted attachment, cognitive delays, and impaired emotional regulation.

Childhood adversity is more prevalent than many are aware of. Prior to the impact of the pandemic, research found that more than two-thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event before age 16, one in seven children have experienced child abuse or neglect and one in five high school students report being bullied.

Children's mental health needs are significant and continuing to grow. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with approximately 20 % of children ages 3 to 17 in the U.S. having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. Additionally, from 2009 to 2019, the share of high school students who reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%, to more than 1 in 3 students. Suicidal behaviors among high school students has continued to grow over the years and early estimates show more than 6,600 suicides among this age group in 2020.

Trauma impacts learning. The impact of traumatic stress impacts a child's impulse control, often resulting in behavioral challenges that can lead to school suspensions and lower grades. Given the pervasiveness of trauma and adversity in children, most educators encounter these students in their classrooms. Often they display behavior outbursts or social withdrawal. When an educator has to interrupt their teaching to address disruptive behavior, the whole class can be negatively impacted. Ensuring that schools have policies, practices and trauma-informed interventions and strategies have the potential to positively impact all children. Children spend many hours a day in school. Educators play a critical role in preparing young people to function successfully in the world. Research supports that benefits of becoming a trauma-informed school can improve school climate, increase teacher satisfaction, reduce student behavioral outbursts and reduce stress for students and teachers. (Oehlburg, B. 2008, Why Schools Need to be Trauma Informed.)

The pandemic has magnified the need for all child serving systems to support the whole child. Last month, the US Surgeon General issued an advisory to highlight the need to address the nation's youth mental health. He issued a strong

call to action to all Americans to help address the mental and emotional needs of children. Last fall, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Adolescent Psychiatry and Children's Hospital Association declared children's mental and emotional health a crisis. They called upon all members of government to invest in meeting the holistic needs of children including an increase in implementation and sustainable funding of effective models of school-based mental health care, including clinical strategies and models for payment as well as promoting and paying for trauma-informed care services that support relational health and child and family resilience.

The foster children we serve at Adoption Rhode Island are some of our state's most vulnerable. They have experienced significant trauma prior to entering foster care and during their time in the system. Many have moved from place to place while in care and far too many have had to spend time in Bradley Hospital due to their behavioral health needs as a result of their traumatic childhoods. The pandemic has taken its toll on them. Educational outcomes for this population are deplorable. Trauma-Informed schools will help support these children and all RI children meet their potential to learn, grow and thrive.

The impact of the additional stress from the pandemic on teachers, principals and other educational leaders has been significant. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Learning Policy Institute, approximately 42% of surveyed Principals are considering leaving their position. Teachers have high levels of stress and burnout. A Rand survey found that nearly 25% of teachers contemplate leaving their jobs and a growing percentage of teachers are deciding that they will not stay in the classroom to retirement. Many teachers feel overwhelmed by the pandemic challenges in part due to the increase in the number of students experiencing learning, behavior and emotional challenges. Without transforming student-learning supports, just adding more mental health services, although important, will contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of efforts to cope with the increased number of learning, behavior and other problems teachers face in the classroom. We need to create a trauma sensitive, trauma supportive learning environment for all and increase school-based mental health supports for children.

The time is now to create trauma informed schools. There are many national and local resources to assist schools in creating Trauma Sensitive Schools. In 2018, Massachusetts legislature created the Childhood Trauma Task Force to better identify how the Commonwealth could better understand and provide support to youth. They have been making advances in creating trauma-informed approaches throughout the pandemic. In Rhode Island, we can pass this legislation, follow advances in brain science and build more supportive learning environments by passing the Trauma-Informed School Act this session.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill. Please support this bill and include an expectation that progress on implementation be reported to the legislature. Please feel free to contact me with questions or concerns.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darlene Allen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Darlene Allen, MS
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