



RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AFT AFL - CIO

To: House Education Committee
From: Maribeth Calabro, President *Maribeth K Calabro*
Date: February 25, 2025
Re: **Testimony in Support of H 5165**
Legislation for District Committees to Establish Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committees

Introduction

Honorable members of the committee,

Thank you for taking the time to listen to our testimony today. I am here today to urge passage of H5165. This legislation mandates each school district's School Board or School Committee to establish a Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committee which will be a crucial component to addressing the significant safety and mental health challenges our schools, teachers, and families face daily, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every day in schools across our state, children in crisis are experiencing rising violence and mental health issues, which negatively affect not only the students themselves but also the overall climate and culture within our schools.

The Need for Action

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the mental health and safety of our students. According to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, one in five children aged six to 17 in Rhode Island has a diagnosable mental health problem, and one in ten experiences significant functional impairment.

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In 2023, 12% of Rhode Island high school students reported not attending school due to safety concerns.

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Additionally, nearly half (46%) of U.S. teens reported being victims of cyberbullying in 2022, with 28% of Rhode Island middle school students and 14% of high school students reporting similar experiences in 2023. rikidscount.org

These statistics underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to enhance student safety and mental health support.

The Role of District Committees

District committees are uniquely positioned to implement targeted interventions that address the specific needs of their communities. By establishing Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committees, districts can:

- **Assess Local Needs:** Conduct surveys and focus groups to identify the unique challenges students face.
- **Develop Tailored Programs:** Create initiatives that address identified issues, such as bullying prevention, mental health awareness, and conflict resolution.
- **Advocate for Resources Effectively:** Advocating that funding and support are directed toward programs with the greatest impact.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Involve parents, teachers, students, and community organizations in the development and implementation of programs.

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Supporting Data

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT reports that in 2021, only about one in five (22%) Rhode Island high school students reported receiving the mental health help they needed. rikidscount.org+4rikidscount.org+4rikidscount.org+4

Conclusion

Establishing Student Safety and Behavioral Health Committees within districts is a proactive and necessary step to addressing the pressing mental health and safety concerns in our schools. By implementing this legislation, we can create supportive environments that foster the well-being and success of all students.

Thank you for your consideration.