

**Lisa Cataldi**

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**From:** Jennifer Lima <jlima2647@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 4, 2025 2:47 PM  
**To:** House Education Committee  
**Subject:** H5338 - Support

Jennifer Lima  
H5338  
Support

My name is Jennifer Lima and I am a member of the North Kingstown School committee. I am writing today as an individual, not representing that group.

In 2022, Rhode Island pediatric and behavioral health organizations declared a Child and Adolescent Mental Health State of Emergency. At that time, more than half (59%) of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.

At North Kingstown High School, consistently one of the top five high schools in the state, we have one school psychologist for a population of roughly 1200 students. Recommended ratios are 1 for every 500 students. Our district as a whole has made conscious efforts over the past few years to increase our mental health staffing, but we would still need 3 additional people to hit the minimum recommended ratio.

There are plenty of statistics out there that you can google on this subject, but I am not here today to talk to you about statistics, I am here to remind you that there are students behind each one of those statistics.

School mental health professionals are playing triage. They are attending to the most emergent, visible concerns within the student body. That means that they are unable to be as proactive in seeking out issues that have not risen to the surface yet as they could be. This is through no fault of their own.. I want to stress that the personnel I know are amazingly knowledgeable, dedicated and caring professionals. They are doing their best based on limited resources. But there are students who are flying under the radar who are struggling.

Not all students have someone in their lives to advocate for them. Even when they do, navigating the system to seek out resources that are needed can be a daunting task. Imagine the impact it would have on our students if support was given while they were at “green” instead of “red”.

There has been a lot of talk lately in the state about unfunded mandates. In a perfect world, this legislation would come with the money to support implementation. As I said, NK would need 3 additional personnel to meet minimum recommended ratios. That’s a cost of roughly \$300,000 per year for salary and benefits that needs to be incorporated into the operating budget. At a time when most districts, including ours, have already cut or pared down the least essential items. That means we too are playing triage. But if mental health is not put at the top of the priority list, everything else suffers. I think it’s important that our state creates a goal that districts should be striving for.

Thank you.

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