



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

To: House Education Committee
From: Maribeth Calabro, President *Maribeth K Calabro*
Date: March 4, 2025
Re: **Testimony in Support of H 5338**
Minimum Staffing for School Psychologists K-12 Education

Honorable Members of the House Education Committee,

As president of the RIFTHP, I come before you today to strongly support the implementation of minimum staffing standards for school psychologists in K-12 education. It is critical to ensure that every student receives the appropriate mental health support and educational services necessary for their success and well-being.

School psychologists play an essential role in promoting student mental health, providing counseling and emotional support, conducting assessments for special education services, and supporting the overall school environment. Their expertise is critical in identifying, diagnosing, and supporting students who face emotional, behavioral, or learning challenges.

The need for this action is not only clear but urgent. The data and research overwhelmingly show that students, particularly those from underserved communities, are experiencing an unprecedented level of mental health challenges that significantly affect their ability to learn and thrive in school.

Rhode Island is facing a significant mental health crisis among its children and adolescents, with profound implications for the state's educational system. Data from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT reveals that 19% of children aged 6 to 17 have diagnosable mental health issues, and 10% experience substantial functional impairments. Alarming, only 22% of high school students reported receiving the necessary mental health support in 2021. rikidscount.org.

This crisis has tragically manifested in youth suicides; between 2018 and 2022, 12 Rhode Island youths aged 15 to 19 died by suicide. Additionally, in 2022, there were 3,265 emergency department visits and 2,271 hospitalizations of Rhode Island children due to mental health disorders. rikidscount.org.

Compounding these challenges is a critical shortage of school psychologists. Nationally, the recommended ratio is one school psychologist per 500 students; however, during the 2021–22 school year, the average was one per 1,127 students. This disparity suggests that many students are not receiving adequate mental health services within the school environment. apa.org.

Understaffing results in longer wait-times for students to receive the psychological assessments and interventions they need. For example, students requiring special education evaluations may experience significant delays in receiving the appropriate support. This delay can prevent students from receiving timely interventions, impeding their academic progress and emotional development. Without prompt action, small issues may evolve into larger challenges, resulting in more severe academic or behavioral problems.

In Rhode Island, this shortage is particularly acute. The state has recognized the need to address this gap, with Rhode Island KIDS COUNT advocating for dedicated funding to schools to hire and retain school social workers and psychologists. rikidscount.org

Addressing this shortage is crucial to ensure that students receive timely and effective mental health support, both to mitigate the current crisis and to foster a supportive educational environment.

When schools are understaffed in terms of school psychologists, the quality of services delivered to students significantly suffers. With fewer professionals to meet the growing mental health needs of students, school psychologists are forced to manage an overwhelming caseload, often having to triage cases based on urgency. This has profound implications for the effectiveness of support systems and student outcomes.

Students who do not have adequate access to mental health services often exhibit more behavioral problems, including increased rates of absenteeism, disruptive behavior, and social withdrawal. These behavioral issues can severely impact their academic achievement and overall school experience. Moreover, students with untreated mental health issues may fall behind in their studies and struggle with forming positive relationships with their peers and teachers, which can affect their long-term success.

Schools in lower-income or rural areas are often the most affected by understaffing. Students in these schools are disproportionately impacted by a lack of access to school psychologists, leaving them with fewer opportunities to receive the support they need. This disparity contributes to the growing achievement gap between affluent and underserved student populations. By ensuring adequate staffing for school psychologists, we can ensure that all students, regardless of their background, have equal access to the mental health and educational services they deserve.

Research shows that when students have access to adequate psychological support, they are more likely to perform better academically, engage positively in school activities, and demonstrate improved behavior. According to a 2020 study by the National Association of School Psychologists, students who received comprehensive mental health services showed significant improvements in both academic performance and emotional well-being.

In conclusion, we urge you to take immediate action in ensuring the implementation of minimum staffing requirements for school psychologists in K-12 education. The mental health crisis affecting our youth requires swift, meaningful intervention, and school psychologists are a critical part of the solution. The data is clear: students need more support, not less. It is our responsibility to provide the resources necessary to ensure that every child can and will succeed in both their academic and personal development.

Passage of this legislation is critical to ensure that all students, regardless of their background or geographic location, have access to the support and services they need to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration.