



April 22, 2025

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara, Chair
House Education Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 5112 – An Act Relating to Education - Curriculum

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we support Bill Number 5112 which advances equitable access to high-quality education and ensures psychological safety. Through the ACHIEVE UNITED Initiative of our LIVE UNITED 2025 Strategic Plan, we are committed to ensuring that every child—regardless of background—has the resources, opportunities, and safe learning environments they need to succeed from early childhood through post-secondary education. Providing schools with the tools to respond to emergencies protects students, educators, and communities, and is an essential component of an equitable and effective education system.

The inclusion of mandatory mental health education in Rhode Island's public school curriculum reflects an urgent response to a growing youth mental health crisis. According to the 2023 *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* by the CDC, nearly 42% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, with 22% seriously considering suicide. These alarming figures underscore the critical need for early, developmentally appropriate mental health instruction. By implementing a structured, four-hour unit in seventh grade, this legislation ensures students begin developing the knowledge and language needed to understand and manage mental health challenges before they intensify in high school years.

Furthermore, this act promotes a more holistic approach to student well-being by aligning physical health education with mental health instruction. Research from the *National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)* shows that 50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, yet many students don't receive any mental health education before symptoms emerge. By embedding mental health into the health curriculum and offering resources statewide, this legislation equips educators to intervene early and helps reduce stigma. It is a proactive step toward fostering safe, supportive school environments where all students can thrive emotionally and academically.

Investing in education is an investment in Rhode Island's future. Bill Number 5112 will help ensure that all students—especially those in historically underserved communities—have the tools they need to thrive in school and beyond. By advancing K-12 education policies that serve each person in the ways they need, we can break cycles of mental illness creating a pathway to long-term success for the next generation. We respectfully urge your support for this legislation to build a more just and prosperous Rhode Island.

Sincerely,
Dana DeMaire
Community Impact & Education Policy Intern - United Way of Rhode Island

Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders