



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

To: House Education Committee
From: Maribeth Calabro, President
Date: March 17, 2026
Re: **Student and Teacher Classroom Safety**
Testimony in **Support** of 2026-H 7526 (Read, et al.)

On behalf of the educators, school health professionals, and support staff represented by the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals (RIFTHP), we submit this testimony in strong support of policies that ensure safe, stable, and productive classroom environments for all students and the professionals who serve them.

Public School educators are firmly committed to educating all students. We believe every student can and will achieve but know that chronic disruptions impact learning. Classrooms and schools without sufficient structure, staffing, and intervention programs are not grounded in equity. When chronically disruptive behavior repeatedly interrupts instruction, threatens safety, or destabilizes the classroom community, it compromises the educational rights of all students and places educators and health professionals in untenable positions. According to the US Department of Education, “Chronic behavioral disruptions by students during class can lead to significant loss of instructional time. On average, educators report losing 2.4 hours of teaching time each week to disruptive behaviors, which adds up to 3 full weeks over the course of the school year. This loss of time can have a ripple effect on the entire educational process, impacting not only the students exhibiting disruptive behavior but also their peers. The more time spent understanding disruptive behavior, the clearer it becomes that prevention is key.”

We are increasingly hearing from teachers, nurses, social workers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers that a small number of students with significant unmet behavioral or mental health needs are consuming a disproportionate share of valuable instructional time. Entire classes lose valuable learning minutes daily. Students experience anxiety and diminished engagement and lose opportunities for academic success. Educators face escalating stress, burnout, and, in some cases, physical injury.

This is not a call for punitive discipline. It is a call for responsible, structured intervention.

When a student’s behavior consistently disrupts learning or compromises safety despite documented interventions, temporary placement in a more appropriate setting must be an available option. Such placements should provide intensive, individualized support delivered by trained behavioral specialists, mental health professionals, and educators equipped to address root causes. The goal must be stabilization, skill development, and a clear, measurable plan for a successful return to the learning environment.

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Two truths must guide policy:

-Students with significant behavioral needs deserve targeted support—not repeated failure in settings that cannot meet those needs.

-All other students have a fundamental right to learn in an environment free from chronic disruption and fear.

We urge policymakers to establish clear and fair standards for when temporary alternative placement is warranted, including:

Documented patterns of behavior that substantially interfere with instruction or safety.

Evidence of intervention attempted within the classroom.

A structured transition plan with measurable goals for re-entry.

Ongoing communication with families and school staff.

Adequate funding for therapeutic and behavioral support programs.

Alternative settings **must not** become holding spaces. They must be staffed, well-resourced, short-term environments focused on stabilization and skill-building, with reintegration supported by clear behavioral plans including goals, accommodations and next steps to ensure safety and academic success for all students.

Chronic classroom disruption is not simply a discipline issue—it is a signal that a student requires more support than the current setting can provide. Without structural solutions, educators cannot continue absorbing the impact of systemic gaps in behavioral and mental health services. Failing to act harms students, families, and school professionals alike.

RIFTHP stands ready to collaborate on policies that protect instructional time, strengthen behavioral and mental health supports, and balance, accountability and structure for all students, every day in every learning setting.

Safe classrooms are foundational to educational equity. By protecting learning environments while ensuring students with significant needs receive meaningful support, we strengthen public education for all.

We respectfully urge your support.

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