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March 17, 2026

TO: House Committee on Education

RE: H 7729

My name is Veronika Kot. I am an education law attorney with Rhode Island Legal Services where I have worked for many years supporting families and children. I am here to support H7729 and to submit proposed revisions which would make it even more effective. I am submitting those proposed changes with my testimony along with photos of the kinds of spaces used to seclude children in schools which this legislation is intended to address.

The legislation proposed here would do away with the practice of secluding children in tiny rooms, often converted closets with padding on the walls. Children are placed forcibly into these closets and are not allowed to leave, sometimes repeatedly or for extended periods of time. I have worked with families whose children were placed in these closets more than 50 times and spent upwards of an hour at a time in them – children as young as kindergarteners.

As revealed by school records, children confined in this way frequently react by banging their head against the wall, disrobing, urinating, vomiting and begging to be sent home. They injure themselves trying to escape. At home they beg not to be sent back to school.

This solitary confinement is practiced disproportionately against children with disabilities. It is harmful to their mental and physical health. It is not therapeutic or calming and it does not increase staff safety or reduce the incidence of restraint.

There are, in contrast, effective, research proven ways to prevent and address disruptive behaviors, while preventing disruption to the classroom and keeping teachers safe and all children learning.

Training and support for teachers, specialized supports for children with specialized needs do work. They are effective. Seclusion is not.

Where I have been able to intervene on behalf of individual children and they were provided appropriate supports or placements, the crises which had previously led to multiple seclusions disappeared.

Seclusion, the involuntary confinement of children, alone, in small separate spaces, is harmful and dangerous. A parent who locked a child in a closet would have the child removed from their custody by DCYF. Seclusion is a holdover from an earlier time of harsh measures and needs to go the way of corporal punishment. We can and must do better. We know how.

I urge you to consider 7729 and the proposed revision to it in order to put an end to harmful seclusion in RI schools.

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