



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5933 Re: Alternatives to Suspensions
House Education Committee**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 5933. This bill would require school districts to provide alternative disciplinary approaches to student conduct such as restorative justice practices, peer mediation, counseling, and tiered interventions to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions by January 1, 2022. We want to thank Representative Ranglin-Vassell for her leadership and also thank the other sponsors in the House, Representatives Hull, Ajello, Fogarty, Potter, Alzate, Barros, Biah, and Henriess.

Effective school disciplinary practices promote a safe and respectful school climate, support learning, and address the causes of student misbehavior. Suspension usually does not deter students from exhibiting negative behaviors and may reinforce negative behavior patterns. Suspended students are more likely than their peers to experience academic failure, juvenile justice system involvement, disengagement from school, isolation from teachers and peers, and dropping out of school.

We are encouraged by the efforts of the General Assembly, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and individual school districts have made to reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions and encourage the use of alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). However, despite these efforts, the number of out-of-school suspensions decreased by less than one percent since 2016 when the General Assembly passed the law that restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions.

During the 2018-2019 school year there were 21,562 suspensions and 46% of these (9,981) were out-of-school suspensions. More than half of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses, such as insubordination/disrespect, disorderly conduct, obscene/abusive language, alcohol/drug/tobacco offenses, and electronic devices/technology offenses.

Out-of-School Suspensions by Infraction, Rhode Island, 2018-2019

BY TYPE OF INFRACTION*	#	%
Fighting	2,072	21%
Insubordination/Disrespect	1,820	18%
Assault of Student or Teacher	1,422	14%
Disorderly Conduct	1,415	14%
Harassment/Intimidation/Threat	1,054	11%
Alcohol/Drug/Tobacco Offenses	993	10%
Obscene/Abusive Language	539	5%
Arson/Larceny/Robbery/Vandalism	231	2%
Weapon Possession	178	2%
Other Offenses	154	2%
Electronic Devices/Technology	103	1%
Attendance Offenses	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	<i>9,981</i>	

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year.

*Harassment offenses include hazing and hate crimes. Assault offenses include sexual assault.

Disparities by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity

Bias in School Discipline by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity, Rhode Island, 2018-2019

	% OF STUDENTS ENROLLED	% OF SUSPENSIONS
Students With Disabilities	15%	31%
White Students	57%	44%
Hispanic Students	26%	34%
Black Students	9%	12%
Asian Students	3%	2%
Native American Students	1%	2%

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year. % suspensions includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Detailed data by district is available at www.ride.ri.gov

In Rhode Island, during the 2018-2019 school year, differently-abled students/students with disabilities were suspended disproportionately. Students with disabilities represent 15% of the student population but represented 31% of suspensions. Students of color were also suspended disproportionately. Black students represent 9% of the student population but represented 12% of suspensions. Hispanic students represent 26% of the student population but represented 34% of suspensions.

Suspensions in the early grades

Of all disciplinary actions during the 2018-2019 school year, 15% (1,515) involved elementary school students (kindergarten-5th grade) and 74% were out-of-school suspensions. Kindergarteners received 133 disciplinary actions, including 110 out-of-school suspensions.

Suspensions in the early grades are more likely when teachers believe the resources and supports available to them are inadequate to meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors. Large class sizes, inadequate student-teacher ratios, and lack of school resources to help teachers manage challenging behaviors are associated with increased suspensions. Mental health consultation is an intervention that works with teachers and families to reduce student's challenging behaviors, improve student-teacher relationships, and prevent suspensions.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts that improve school climate, decrease the use of suspensions, and provide resources to school districts that help ensure that schools are safe and secure places that are conducive to learning and that investments are made in school mental health professionals who can address trauma and the mental health conditions that can impact a student's health and behavior at school.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on this issue over the past several years and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.