

I am Carolyn Sheehan, a founder and Executive Director of Blackstone Academy in Pawtucket, a 20 year old high school for 350 students from Central Falls, Pawtucket and Providence. I am writing to express my extreme opposition to H8310.

I want to start by saying that I do not believe that most schools or districts who do not have SROs presently even know about this bill introduced on June 2nd. I do not believe that there has been any attempt to reach out to the districts, schools or school departments across the state or police departments. No one asked about our needs before they asked you to mandate resource officers in every school. And to my knowledge, no one has asked the municipalities about their capacity to staff these positions.

There have been decades of practice and research which contribute to the formula for creation of safe schools. Safe schools are first and foremost those which address the social-emotional needs of their students. This includes training teachers, staff and students in non-violent conflict-resolution techniques, appropriate to the age group served by the school. It includes schools where everyone is trained and supported in practices such as Discipline with Dignity and Restorative practices. Safe schools give natural consequences and utilize law enforcement only when the law has been violated and physical conflicts or significant threats occur. Programs like the ALICE program allow all school staff and students to make split second decisions when a threat of violence occurs or an active shooting takes place.

These are all programs that we have in my school and I have to say, the majority of my teachers, students, staff and parents consider our school a safe place to be; in fact many of them rely on it as a sanctuary. If you review our annual Surveyworks data, you will see confirmation of this. We have also invested annually in building improvements related to safety including camera systems, locks and bullet resistant glass. We rarely have to call the Pawtucket police for incidents, but when we do they respond within minutes as we are ½ mile from the station. We collaborate with all three cities on career explorations. We have hosted more than one event where students and police have shared experiences from each other's perspective in an effort to increase empathy from both points of view. We have alumni and a board member who are police officers and who help to advise us.

My school community, including my Board of Directors should be able to assess our safety needs and make decisions as to what is most important to fund based upon the advice of experts and best practice related to school safety. I have been to days and days of training in school safety and have worked in concert with the Pawtucket Police on our school safety plan and active shooter drills. It has never, ever been suggested to me that we need a school resource officer in my small high school, that this should be a priority for my funding or that they think this is a need. They have assured me and my team that they would arrive in mass along with other law enforcement within minutes of a call of a shooter and due to our location, they would be joined by hoards of other law enforcement.

Please revert the bill back to the language that allows schools and communities to opt in. Thank you!