

Steven Sepe

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To: House Finance Committee
Subject: Testimony for HB 8310

In Opposition of House Bill 8310 - "The Education Equity and Property Tax Relief Act"

Dexter Vincent

I oppose House Bill 2022 - 8310 for the following reasons:

This bill recommends a number of fund allocations for education related purposes. While some of these allocations will improve the level of education, such as the funds for special education and EL programs, the focus of this bill, the placement of two Student Resource Officers in each school will be detrimental to student safety, experiences, and learning outcomes. Furthermore, it will take away valuable funds from necessary school assets such as good food and water, career and mental health counselors, and adequate school buildings.

I myself am a student at Classical High School. Through my time there, and my engagement with my community over the past few years I have heard of several instances within Providence alone of SROs mishandling situations so severely that it resulted in serious student injury and disciplinary action for the officer. Officers on multiple occasions have not only used excessive force while handling situations with students who may have been misbehaving, but they have also used force against students with conditions such as autism, who did not do anything to provoke an officer. In the US there have been 152 documented assaults of students of color between 2007 and 2021. Additionally, SROs have made 230 arrests in Providence schools alone between 2016 and 2020. This excessive use of force and arrests by SROs tend to be targeted towards students with disabilities and students of color. Black students comprise 30 percent of the arrests, while only being 15 percent of the student population. The threat that SROs pose to students is in spite of their training, and the simple fact of their presence is shown to escalate situations, leading to violence and arrests which should not have happened in the first place. This is a serious threat to student safety.

Furthermore, the presence of Student Resource Officers in schools increases fatalities in school shootings, according to researchers from the University of Albany and the RAND Corporation, published by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University. SROs were found to increase fire-arm related conflicts on school grounds. Those intending to open fire on a school with SROs also bring more powerful weapons, as they are aware that the SROs will be armed. Additionally, many school shootings are also suicides, so those shooting target schools with SROs, who have the fire-power to kill them. Alongside their direct harm to student populations, SROs fail to increase school safety, as seen in Uvalde Texas. Uvalde spent about 40 percent of its budget on police and security, and spent almost \$450,000 on school security devices in the last year alone. None of this worked when a shooter tragically killed 21 people. SROs have proven routinely not only to fail to prevent harm for students, but also to increase the chances of serious harm or death.

Spending on SROs also takes away vital funds which would otherwise be spent for more effective and necessary causes. The money this bill allocates for the salaries and benefits of dozens of SROs would be much better spent on social workers, counselors, school building infrastructure, and teacher salaries. The presence of social workers in schools not only creates an environment of student health, reducing conflict and increasing outcomes, but also reduces the chance of school shootings. In very many cases, school shooters are individuals who attended the school they assault, and suffer from mental illness. The presence of social workers in schools will help to increase the health of the students and to therefore reduce the chance of a student feeling isolated enough to commit a heinous act such as a school shooting.

The presence of School Resource Officers is intimidating to all students, and as such reduces their opportunities for learning. They do not only fail to protect students, but actively endanger them both by their own actions and their simple presence. Allocating millions of dollars for 2 SROs in each school will take away funds from other necessary school facets, and will decrease school health, learning outcomes, school safety, and will disproportionately harm students of color. The passage of this bill would be a major step back for education in the Great State of Rhode Island.