

TO: House Finance Committee
FROM: Eric Gottlieb, Rhode Island Center for Justice
DATE: June 13, 2022
RE: Testimony Against H8310

My name is Eric Gottlieb, and I am a community member and intern with the Rhode Island Center for Justice. Because H8310 threatens to turn RI's schools into more hostile and unsafe environments for this state's students, I stand in opposition to the bill.

Before criticizing this bill's new SRO requirement, I want to acknowledge how H8310's proponents have a valid and genuine fear. After Uvalde, I understand how terrifying it can be to send our children to a potentially life-threatening place. No student should have to spend five days a week there. And parents should not be expected to send their kids to a place that cannot guarantee every student's safety. My only concern with H8310 is that it takes the wrong approach to solving that problem.

On face, it makes sense to send more police officers to RI's schools; after all, it is their job to protect the wellbeing of everyday citizens. The problem is that, in practice, adding SROs to schools makes them more unsafe. Years of solid peer-reviewed research comes to one resounding conclusion: "more people die in school shootings where an armed officer is present than when there isn't." Not only do police officers fail to save lives during a shooting, they rarely prevent those shootings from happening in the first place. \$435,270 worth of security services could not stop a single gunman from opening fire at Uvalde; nor could the 140 officers who arrived on the scene. At Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, the same happened—an SRO hid rather than apprehending the shooter. In short, H8310's SRO mandate equips RI schools with an ineffective tool at keeping kids safe.

On the other hand, SROs frequently arrest, antagonize, and traumatize the students they oversee. Intuitively, it seems obvious that adding police to schools would make students feel safer. Again, the evidence gives a damning rebuke. Nationally, police disproportionately criminalize Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students. And those trends bleed into Providence, where 65% of all arrests between the 2016-17 and 2019-20 school years were boys of color. Students report feeling more unsafe around SROs. At one extreme, police physically assault students, traumatizing them for years.

In summary, H8310 sacrifices certainty for uncertainty. We don't know if police presence can really help during a school shooting; oftentimes, it doesn't. But we do know that adding SROs to RI schools makes students feel more unsafe every single day they're present.

The resources spent on law enforcement could be better invested into effective and evidence-based restorative practices, like funding mental health support for students. Restorative justice is among the most promising solutions; The Providence Alliance for Student Safety has put together a 70-page proposal for restorative justice practices, complete with explanations for what it is, how it works, and what budgetary changes are needed to execute this shift. Unlike traditional disciplinary systems, restorative justice doesn't take a punitive approach to school discipline, but rather a preventative approach that provides strategies for addressing the root causes of harm. When properly implemented, restorative justice has been shown to significantly reduce incidents of "misbehavior," create a safer classroom environment, and reduce racial disparities in school discipline.

For these reasons, I urge you to vote no on H8310.

Eric Gottlieb
RI Center for Justice