

June 14, 2022

Chair Abney and Honorable Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Jonathan Cohen, and I am a resident of Providence and an attorney at the Rhode Island Center for Justice. I'm submitting this testimony in opposition to House Bill 8310, which mandates that a minimum of two (2) school resource officers (SROs) be placed at every public school in the State of Rhode Island.

I urge you to vote against this measure, which – despite its highly worthy goal of improving school safety – is both ill-conceived and counterproductive. I write as both an attorney who has conducted research on the constitutional rights of students, as well as a public school graduate reflecting on my experiences growing up in police-free schools. From both perspectives, increasing the presence of police officers in our schools is a poor policy choice.

In a 2017 empirical study on student surveillance and racial inequities, Professor Jason Nance wrote that security measures like increased SROs “create an intense-prison like environment that arguably is highly-intrusive, undignified, and inconsistent with a healthy learning atmosphere.”<sup>1</sup> Such practices, he continues, “disrupt feelings of trust, cooperation, and respect among members of the community,” and leave students with “a heightened sense of danger and disillusion.” Finally, he writes:

“The impacts of increased police presence in schools have been sweeping: a dramatic increase in contact with law enforcement, an expansion in the types of roles police play in schools, an increase in student referrals to police, an increase in student arrests, and accountability problems stemming from student-police contact.”

Other experts, including the litany of Rhode Island public school student members of the Providence Alliance for Student Safety (PASS) Coalition, have corroborated as much. Throughout their 70 page plan for police-free schools – which outlines measures that decision makers could take to actually address school safety in the state – Coalition members shared harrowing accounts of their experiences with SROs in their schools, and how that has negatively impacted their learning environment. In one example, the mother of a 13-year-old Black girl who was gratuitously arrested at her middle school described the impact on her daughter, saying: “My child went from outgoing to not wanting to go anywhere, to not wanting to talk to people. Every time she sees a police officer, she thinks she’s going to be arrested.”<sup>2</sup>

These unfortunate outcomes transcend the experiences of certain Rhode Island students, or even the intentions or actions of individual SROs. Experts have documented several negative impacts stemming from the use of SROs, including influencing schools to be more focused on law and order and less focused on students’ social and emotional well-being, negatively affecting students' bonds to their schools, and contributing to environments in which students are less

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<sup>1</sup> Jason P. Nance, *Student Surveillance, Racial Inequalities, and Implicit Racial Bias*, 66 Emory L.J. 765, 777-78 (2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Providence Alliance for Student Safety Plan for Police-Free Schools* (June 2021), available at <https://upriseri.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Providence-Alliance-For-Student-Safety-Plan-FINAL.pdf>.

likely to feel valued, respected, listened to, and like a part of a community.<sup>3</sup>

While there is a fair amount of research clarifying the negative impacts of increased SRO presence in schools, there is shockingly little indicating that such policies benefit our students by improving school safety. Specifically, there is no conclusive evidence to support the proposition that school policing measures make schools, or students, safer. For example, a study of North Carolina state grants for funding SROs concluded that middle schools that used the grants did not report reductions in serious incidents like assaults, homicide, bomb threats, possession and use of alcohol and drugs, or the possession of weapons.<sup>4</sup> Concerningly, a 2018 study of the impact of similar grants in Texas found a 6 percent increase in middle school discipline rates, a 2.5 percent decrease in high school graduation rates, and a 4 percent decrease in college enrollment rates.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the high social costs, and lack of clear benefits, to increasing police presence in our schools, I implore this Committee to vote no on H8310. Given this moment's demand for meaningful government action to ensure that our children feel safe in their schools, I urge this Committee to follow the lead of the PASS Coalition, and legislate evidence-based reforms for keeping our kids safe and our schools inclusive.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jonathan Cohen  
Attorney, Rhode Island Center for Justice

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Kupchik, *Research on the Impact of School Policing* (Aug. 2020), 3, available at <https://fisafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Research-on-School-Policing-by-Aaron-Kupchik-July-2020.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Alonzo Anderson, *Policing and Middle Schools: An Evaluation of a Statewide School Resource Officer Policy*, *Middle Grades Review*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2 (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Emily W. Weisburst, *Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-term Education Outcomes* (Oct. 2018).