

June 14, 2022

Representative Marvin L. Abney, Chairman  
House Committee on Finance  
Rhode Island General Assembly  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903  
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**In opposition to H 8310**

Honorable Chairman Abney and members of the committee:

I am writing in **strong opposition to the proposed House Bill 8310**, which would require school districts and municipalities to have in place two (2) school resource officers within the confines of every public school on or after July 1, 2022.

I am the parent of two Providence Public Schools students. I am a parent representative on the Providence School Building Committee. I serve on the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) Board at my children's school. I also represent their school on the Providence Schools Parent Advisory Council (PAC), and have served over 5 years on the PAC leadership team. I am a member of Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE).

Today you will read or hear testimony from other parent organizers, youth and student leaders, family advocates, and policy experts why this bill would inflict more harm than good. It is critical that this committee listen especially to our youth, who are the most directly affected by police presence in schools. The harm is greatest for students of color, who make up more than 90% of districts like Providence. When students are arrested or detained in juvenile facilities, they are far less likely to complete high school and far more likely to be arrested in the future.

Research suggests that school climate—including academic outcomes—is negatively impacted by the presence of police and other law enforcement in our schools. I want to share an experience that highlights how that school climate matters for ALL students in a school, not just the ones who are arrested, detained, or facing direct discipline from law enforcement. When my younger child was in third grade, for several months, one of her classmates and their teacher clashed repeatedly over behavior expectations. On one particular occasion, the teacher chose to contact the police to intervene during school hours. Other third grade students witnessed this, and parents from all grades were alarmed at school dismissal time to see a police presence at their elementary school. Rumors flew that this student—an 8 or 9 year old child—was arrested and “in trouble with the police”. Other students in the classroom became fearful that any infraction might result in being arrested. Some students and families (including my own) noted that this incident followed their previous observations that while a variety of students did act out at school (just as one might expect to be developmentally appropriate for their age), white students were often not reprimanded or punished as frequently or as harshly as their peers of color, particularly by white teachers.

At the time of the above incident, there were no guidance counselors available in Providence elementary schools; thankfully this is no longer the case since the state intervention in PPSD prioritized this support. However both at the time of that incident and now more than ever, the adults tasked with caring for our children's social, emotional, and mental health are understaffed and overwhelmed by the needs of our students. These social workers, psychologists, school nurses, building administrative team members, and other school based staff are trying to help our children through a global pandemic, in an increasingly polarized society, without meaningful laws to protect them from mass shootings or other gun violence.

More police in our schools will do nothing to increase students' academic performance, health and wellness, or even safety. As recent tragedies like that in Uvalde, TX have demonstrated, having police directly on site does not even keep children or teachers safe from the most horrific outcomes in situations with mass shooters. More police in our schools will further criminalize children, especially students of color, and will perpetuate a culture of fear and violence instead of solving it.

If this committee is interested in supporting all Rhode Island students to be successful, and in keeping everyone inside our schools safe, please redirect your energy and funding toward the things that can actually do that. Fund more counselors and other mental health professionals in our schools, as well as programs that create a pipeline of trained professionals in these fields through our institutions of higher education. Direct more funding toward improving school facilities so that every student feels valued and invested in coming to school. Enact legislation to significantly limit access to guns. Support more robust training for teachers and staff in restorative and explicitly anti-racist practices, as well as additional mental health supports for our teachers and staff themselves, who bear the weight of helping our students with complex social, emotional, and academic needs. **Do not add school resource officers to high schools, middle schools, or elementary schools, and do not advance H 8310 out of this committee.**

Respectfully,

Melissa S. Hughes  
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