

My name is Michelle Alas, I am a community member and a worker with the RI Center for Justice, concerned about the safety and security of Rhode Island public schools. I oppose House Bill No. 8310.

As a community volunteer working at Nathanael Greene and Calcutt Middle Schools, I have witnessed young students watching their peers be put in police cars. I have seen the impact that has on the students observing, effectively normalizing the militarization of their schools. Students of color are three times more likely to be arrested when there is a police officer at their school, this is a fact. If we put SROs in every school in Rhode Island, as H8310 requires, students of color are going to be most at risk. However, given what we know about the police scene at Uvalde, where there were several police officers at the scene when the gunman was in the school and did nothing, other than wait outside for seventy-plus minutes while 19 children were being murdered, having a police officer on the scene does close to nothing to prevent or mitigate mass shooting such as the latest tragedy.

I urge the General Assembly to be preventative instead of reactive. You have heard from many Rhode Island public school students who oppose stationing police officers in school. Their needs should be the most important factor in deciding how to make school truly safe for ALL students. Instead of stationing police officers at every school, I urge you to invest in restorative justice practices, counselors in schools and more mental health resources for school and upgrades to school facilities as students have been calling for over many years. I urge you to vote no on House Bill No. 8310.

This bill ignores the years of research showing that SROs not only fail to keep our students safe from external threats, but actively harm and endanger the very students who are meant to be served and supported. School resource officers put our youth at significant risk on a day-to-day basis. The evidence shows that police, both in Providence and the U.S. widely, disproportionately criminalize Black, Indigenous, Latinx and students of color, as well as differently-abled students.¹ In Providence schools alone, there were over 230 arrests between the 2016-17 and 2019-20 school years, 65% of whom were boys of color. Meanwhile, Black students were targeted in 30% of all student arrests, while only making up 16% of the student population.² There is no evidence that SROs improve student safety. Instead, research shows that the majority

¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oZS1jQ8c0E7Gqhx21v5BUaU1LLczXcz/view>;
<https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors>

² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b6c61467e3c3ac8b9c44952/t/5fdaaaa079494d6aaf876077/1608166052217/CYCLE+Discipline+Report+Final+Dec+2020+%281%29.pdf>

of students feel unsafe with SROs.³ At the worst extreme, the police are known to physically traumatize students – in the US, there have been 152 documented assaults on students of color by police officers between 2007-2021.⁴

The proponents of this bill are acting from a very real and valid fear. I too am heartbroken and terrified for our children in the aftermath of the latest mass shooting in Uvalde. Despite our differences, we share a common goal: keeping our children safe. We recognize and affirm your labor, which is rooted in the same love and yearning for justice as ours; we have faith in our shared vision of schools as sites of safety, belonging, and learning, rather than places that our students are scared to enter and parents are afraid to send them to in the mornings.

In the spirit of shared love, goals, and dreams for our children, we invite you to work with us in implementing evidence-based solutions that actually work. The Providence Alliance for Student Safety has put together a 70-page proposal for restorative justice practices, which you can view [here](#), 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. **I urge you to vote no on House Bill No. 8310.**

Thank you for your consideration,

Michelle Alas
R.I. Center for Justice

³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oZS1jQ8c0E7Gqxb21v5BUaU1LLczXcz/view>;
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.877.1653&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

⁴ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oZS1jQ8c0E7Gqxb21v5BUaU1LLczXcz/view>