

TO: House Finance Committee  
FROM: Robin Hwang, Rhode Island Center for Justice  
DATE: June 14, 2022  
RE: Testimony Against H-8310

My name is Robin Hwang, and I am a community member and intern with the Rhode Island Center for Justice. I am writing to oppose H8310 because of the evidence that shows the placement of School Resource Officers (SROs) as a fundamentally flawed way to protect students. From my own experience at a high school with a SRO, I saw an officer who reacted to a classmate experiencing an epileptic seizure as a target to be restrained, rather than a student who needs medical attention. As a result of this incident, the student felt scared to be on campus in the officer's presence. Unfortunately, a variety of research demonstrates that this student's experience is not an isolated case.

After the horrifying shooting at Uvalde, having SROs at our schools initially appear as the intuitive solution to protect the students of Rhode Island. Proponents of H8310 may claim that, in the event of an active shooter, SROs can immediately respond to the gunman. While I share this urge to find a way to protect students, the cases of Uvalde and Stoneman Douglas High School demonstrate that SROs are not the answer. In fact, evidence shows SRO programs can harm students by making the school environment more dangerous.

SROs remain harmful to students in the day-to-day operations of the school, in which SROs spend the vast majority of their time. In fact, a 2018 study in Texas found that SROs are linked with increases in incidents and disciplinary issues, rather than decreasing them. The causes of these issues are based on the simple fact that police officers are not counselors. Police officers are trained to enforce law, not to work with children or adolescents. Police officers react to behavioral issues with the tools of law enforcement like arrest and physical force, not developmental support. In short—supporting students is not a police officer's main job, nor should it be.

The consequences of this disconnect between the well-being of students and the job of police officers have only widened as SRO programs became commonplace. One in four students are in schools with police officers but no support staff. The students that face the greatest harm from this situation are students of color and differently-abled students. Here in Providence, black students make up 30% of PPSD student arrests while making up 15% of the enrolled student body. Meanwhile, differently-abled students nationwide are almost three times more likely to be arrested at school. Again, these discrepancies are rooted in the fact that empathetic care for students of different experiences is simply not the main duty of a police officer.

Like many other community members, for and against H8310, I share the fear of a shooting at our schools. Students should be able to attend school without fear of violence, and teachers should be able to focus on their job as educators. But the evidence fails to show that SRO programs are the best step towards these goals. Instead, I would ask you to consider the 70-page proposal of the Providence Alliance for Student Safety for a new vision of student safety that considers both the hard evidence and the well-being of students first and foremost.

In light of these considerations, I urge you to vote no on H8310.

Robin Hwang  
Rhode Island Center for Justice