

Good evening, Mr. Chairman and members of the House Finance Committee,

I am here in support of House Bill 6045.

My name is **Aaliyah Rivera**. I'm a student in the 11th grade at **Classical High School**, and I'm a youth leader at ARISE. This bill would require every public school (K-12) in Rhode Island to have at least one full-time certified school social worker for every 250 students and would allocate \$2 million in the fiscal year 2025 budget to help school districts and municipalities hire additional social workers.

I am advocating for this bill to get certified school social workers in school because having someone to talk to is important. Having a social worker or someone certified in that area of human services, serves as an improved alternative route than punitive treatment. Punitive measures reiterate the idea that public school students are violent products of the violent environment that they are forced to experience. It is crucial for schools to prioritize restorative justice practices and provide resources for students to address underlying issues causing behavioral problems **like** hiring more social workers and mental health support. By shifting the focus from punishment to support, this bill can help students succeed and break the cycle of inequality in education.

Research has shown that punitive measures like out-of-school suspensions and expulsions have been shown to disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities, leading to increased dropout rates and involvement in the criminal justice system, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline. By increasing the number of social workers and mental support within schools, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students to thrive academically and socially.

Having mental health counselors that are certified in restorative justice training in schools can provide additional support for students in need of guidance and intervention. By implementing a comprehensive approach to addressing behavioral issues, schools can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and again, please pass this bill, your public school students need you.