

I am a Providence resident homeowner, taxpayer, voter, and employee of the city of Providence via the public school department. I am writing today as a licensed independent clinical social worker (LICSW), a national board certified school social worker, and a member of the National Association of Social Workers Rhode Island Chapter (NASW-RI). I urge you to support Bill # H6045 relating to school social workers and education. This bill is pivotal to ensuring schools have the support they need to help students receive the resources necessary to succeed academically. Because access to school social workers is imperative to the success of students in school, NASW recommends a ratio of one social worker for every 250 students. Having an appropriate social worker-to-student ratio allows social workers to properly attend to the students' mental health and wellness needs, thus increasing their trajectory for success in school.

As a school social worker in the Providence public school system, I have paid particular attention to the criticisms and complaints about low attendance and poor test scores. I have heard the declaration that we are in the midst of a childrens' mental health crisis. I have heard endless promises made in the state's Turnaround Plan and all of the back and forth between the Mayor, the school board, the city council, and the Commissioner about what is working and what is not. I am here to assert that without more school social workers, the desired change is not possible. The district can add more teacher certification requirements and hours of professional development, but unless that teacher can identify that Tommy is autistic and finds the gym overstimulating, contributing to more than 30 absences, his attendance will not improve. Until teachers understand that Susan cannot concentrate because she is worried about her younger sister's safety while her uncle babysits, her test scores will not improve. If and when teachers can connect AJ hiding out in the bathroom to days that cheese sticks are served for breakfast as a problem of undiagnosed lactose intolerance and not oppositional defiant disorder, only then will he stop missing 60 instructional minutes per week.

Please keep in mind that I am the only full time social worker in an elementary school of nearly 600 students, including specialized classrooms for disabled students. In addition to problem-solving and addressing issues referenced above on a daily basis, I help to maintain a safe and supportive environment within the school through daily student check-ins, individual and group counseling, and programming focused on social emotional learning. Beyond mental health support in the schools, I refer families and students to community-based resources that can support their needs, maintain contact with outside providers, and mirror that support within the school. Lastly, but not exhaustive of my duties, I am the primary responder to all mental health crises in the school. As of this 143rd day of the school year, I have had 803 interactions with students, 5.3% of which were related to crises. The significance of those numbers is that as my contacts with students have increased each year, the percentage of contacts that are related to mental health crises have declined. During the 2023-2024 school year, I had 668 contacts, 8.1% were for crises. And during the previous year, I had 333 contacts with 12.9% of them being for crises. Students in crisis cannot maintain their personal safety let alone be academically successful. It is clear that prevention works; more social workers are needed to provide preventative care to save lives as well as to improve the odds of academic success.

For all of these reasons, I am in strong support of Bill # H6045 and urge passage of this bill as soon as possible. Thank you for your consideration!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dale L. Folan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dale" and last name "Folan" clearly distinguishable.

Dale L. Folan, LICSW