

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Emily Darrow, and I come before you today with 16 years of experience as a teacher and school administrator in public schools. The perspective I share comes from directly witnessing both the challenges our students face and the transformative impact of proper mental health support.

The numbers tell a stark story: one social worker for every 876 students across our state. As someone who has worked in our schools for over a decade, I can tell you what this ratio means in human terms. It means a student in crisis waiting days to see support staff. It means overwhelmed social workers trying to serve hundreds more students than they can effectively support. It means missed opportunities for early intervention that could prevent crisis situations.

The reality in our schools is that mental health challenges have become a primary barrier to academic success. We cannot teach algebra to a student who is experiencing an anxiety attack. We cannot expect reading comprehension from a child who is grappling with trauma. The declaration of a Child and Adolescent Mental Health State of Emergency in 2022 wasn't just a headline for us – it was a validation of what we've been seeing in our schools every single day.

The proposed ratio of one social worker per 250 students isn't an arbitrary number – it's the minimum threshold needed to provide meaningful support. In my career, I've worked at both schools with adequate mental health staffing and those without. The contrast is striking. Schools with sufficient social workers don't just see better mental health outcomes; they see improved attendance, better academic performance, and stronger school communities.

The \$2 million allocation in this bill represents more than a budget line item – it's an investment in our students' future. When we know that children living in poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers, this funding becomes a matter of educational equity.

I've sat in too many meetings with parents, trying to explain why their child has to wait weeks to see a social worker. I've watched too many talented educators struggle to support students through mental health challenges without adequate professional backup. Most painfully, I've seen too many bright, capable students unable to reach their potential because we lack the staffing to provide the support they desperately need.

This bill isn't just about adding staff – it's about acknowledging that student mental health is fundamental to learning. It's about recognizing that we cannot fulfill our educational mission without addressing the whole child. It's about ensuring that every student in Rhode Island has access to the support they need to succeed.

I urge you to support this legislation. Our students cannot wait any longer.

Thank you for your time and consideration.