

My name is Laura Starr, I am a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker with 20 years experience. I am submitting this written testimony in support of Bill H6045, The Ratio Bill for public schools to staff social workers at the rate of 1:250 students.

I worked in the Providence Public School District as a school social worker for the full 2023-2024 academic year, and from September of 2024-January of 2025 this academic year. I am, by most accounts, the kind of candidate Providence would want: I am fully bilingual in Spanish, I have years of experience working with Spanish speaking families and their children, and have significant work history in fast paced, intense environments, such as correctional mental health, that required spontaneous creative problem solving and the ability to be calm in chaos.

My first year was devoted to pre-k and I served about 65 preschool students. The caseload was manageable and I loved it. Due to funding changes, this past fall I transferred to an elementary school where my caseload ballooned from 65 to covering an entire school of 450 elementary aged students, grades pre-k-5. The school psychologist position was open, and while the district was working hard to find a candidate, it left only me covering IEP meetings, providing legally required IEP counseling, crisis intervention, problem solving behavior challenges with teachers, delivering groups at lunch time to build social and emotional skills, and handle the variety of other social/emotional issues that naturally pop up throughout a school day.

I loved the students and their families. I made strong connections with educators, and I worked hard with my colleagues, across disciplines, to provide the students what they needed in order to be able to access their education. I also received substantial support from colleagues and, while the job was a lot of work, I wanted to be there.

But even with all of the support I was receiving, the sheer magnitude of covering 450 students took its toll on me. In order to try to complete as much of my work as I could, I was going non stop all day, often not having time to eat lunch, staying later, arriving earlier, and I found myself becoming a different version of myself. I had less to give at work and at home and, ultimately, I had to make the truly heartbreaking decision to leave the district.

If there had been another social worker at my school, I would not have left. Having another clinician to split the workload and problem solve with would have made such a difference. I have no doubt that if I had another social worker in my building with me, I would still be in that position. Passing this bill will help a future social worker be able to stay in a position they truly love because they won't have to do it alone. In turn, Providence won't lose valuable candidates who want to be there. The teachers, the children, and their families deserve to have social workers who have the resources and ability to support them.

*Laura Starr, LICSW*

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