

**Chairman, Committee Members,**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a testimony today. As an Independently Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the State of Rhode Island and as a Project Director for School-Based Programs at a nonprofit organization, I would like to express my strong support for Bill H6045 and extend my gratitude to Representative Shall Cross Smith for sponsoring this important legislation. This bill would mandate that all public schools employ at least one full-time certified school social worker for every 250 students and allocate \$2 million in appropriations within the Fiscal Year 2026 state budget.

As a practicing social worker, I am acutely aware of the significant role that social workers play in supporting the mental health and well-being of students. I would like to share a personal experience to illustrate the importance of this provision. During my time as a contracted social worker in a school, I was referred a student who exhibited behavioral issues—getting into altercations in the hallways, missing classes, and, as a result, struggling academically. These behaviors led him down a path of unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Upon working with this student and providing mental health support, I learned that he was experiencing symptoms of PTSD, stemming from the traumatic loss of a sibling to gun violence at a young age. With this understanding, I was able to collaborate with school personnel to provide the necessary resources and support, ultimately helping him to re-engage with school and improve his overall functioning.

Had this student not had access to a social worker, he may have been labeled as disruptive and would likely have been at risk of dropping out of school. Research shows that school dropout is linked to a range of negative consequences, including higher rates of unemployment, lower earning potential, and increased likelihood of incarceration. The financial impact on communities can be as high as \$500,000 in future public assistance costs. Through my intervention as a social worker, I was able to prevent these outcomes, ensuring that the student received the support he needed to continue his education.

Research indicates that 70% of adults in the United States have experienced some form of trauma in their lifetime, equating to 223.4 million people. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that 1 in 4 children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that impacts their learning and behavior. Trauma's effects on education are well-documented: lower GPAs, increased absenteeism, higher dropout rates, and more frequent suspensions and expulsions. Unresolved trauma can lead to long-term physical and mental health conditions. Studies have shown that high levels of stress in childhood can alter brain development and result in lifelong social and health issues.

A 2024 report from Rhode Island Kids Count highlights the ongoing mental health crisis both nationally and in Rhode Island, recommending increased funding to expand the number of school-based mental health professionals. Additionally, a report from the Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families, titled *Children in Crisis Can't Wait*, underscores the challenges families face in navigating the current system of care, exacerbated by long wait times and a shortage of providers. These findings further stress the urgent need for additional school-based mental health support.

School social workers are essential as they serve as the primary point of contact for many students in need of mental health support. They are uniquely trained to address the social, emotional, and behavioral challenges that students face, and their presence in schools has been shown to improve

overall health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic performance, and career readiness, while reducing disciplinary incidents.

For these reasons, I strongly support this bill. The investment in this legislation will not only improve the health and well-being of our children but also contribute to better outcomes for our society as a whole.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Sarnya KP*