

04/29/2025

To: Rhode Island House Finance Committee

From: Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE)

RE: H-6045 – Expanding School-Based Mental Health Support

Chairperson and esteemed members of the Senate Finance Committee,

On behalf of **Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE)** and the families we represent, we submit this testimony in **strong support of H-6045**, which ensures that every public school in Rhode Island has at least one full-time school social worker for every 250 students. Mental health is an essential component of a child's ability to learn, grow, and thrive. Yet, too many Rhode Island students struggle with **anxiety, depression, trauma, and other mental health challenges without adequate support in their schools**. The passage of H-6045 would address this urgent issue by providing the staffing and resources needed to **prioritize student well-being, improve school climate, and strengthen academic success**.

PLEE is a **parent-led grassroots organization** dedicated to advocating for educational equity across Rhode Island. Through our work, we have witnessed firsthand the **devastating impact that unmet mental health needs have on students and families**. When students are struggling emotionally, their ability to focus, engage, and succeed in school is significantly impaired. Parents repeatedly share stories of their children waiting **weeks or even months** to see a school counselor because there are simply not enough mental health professionals available. For many families, especially those facing financial hardship, school-based mental health services **are the only accessible form of mental health care for their children**. Without enough school social workers, students are left without the critical support they need to navigate stress, trauma, and emotional challenges.

The data paints a stark picture of the student mental health crisis. According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, **one in three high school students**

reports persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, a 40% increase over the past decade. Additionally, suicide is now the **second leading cause of death among youth nationwide.** In Rhode Island, **mental health-related emergency room visits among children have surged** in recent years, signaling an urgent need for earlier intervention and school-based support. These statistics are not just numbers—they represent children who are struggling, families who are desperate for help, and educators who are overwhelmed by the mental health challenges their students are facing.

Despite the severity of this crisis, Rhode Island schools remain **dramatically understaffed** when it comes to mental health professionals. The **National Association of Social Workers recommends a ratio of one social worker per 250 students, yet many Rhode Island schools fall far short of this standard.** In some districts, there is only **one social worker for an entire school**, leaving them stretched too thin to provide the consistent, individualized support that students need. Some schools have no full-time social workers at all, forcing teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors—who are already overburdened—to take on mental health responsibilities they are not fully equipped to handle.

This lack of support has far-reaching consequences. **Students who do not receive adequate mental health care are more likely to experience academic struggles, disciplinary issues, chronic absenteeism, and disengagement from school.** A study from the **Annenberg Institute at Brown University** found that expanding access to school-based mental health services **significantly improves student academic outcomes and reduces dropout rates.** Furthermore, schools with strong mental health support systems report **fewer behavioral incidents, stronger teacher-student relationships, and an overall more positive learning environment.**

H-6045 is a necessary step to address this crisis by ensuring that every public school in Rhode Island has a full-time social worker for every 250 students. This legislation not only **establishes a minimum staffing requirement for school social workers** but also provides **\$2 million in funding to help districts hire additional personnel.** By making this investment, Rhode Island can ensure that **every student—regardless of income, zip code, or background—has access to the mental health support they need to succeed.**

Providing school-based mental health services is not just a moral imperative; it is also a **fiscally responsible investment**. Research consistently shows that **early intervention reduces the long-term costs associated with untreated mental health issues, including hospitalizations, juvenile justice involvement, and long-term economic instability**. When students receive the support they need in school, they are more likely to stay on track academically, graduate, and contribute positively to their communities.

The urgency of this issue cannot be overstated. **Students are struggling now, and they cannot afford to wait for change**. Schools should be safe havens where children feel supported, not places where they are left to navigate overwhelming emotions on their own. Teachers, parents, and administrators alike are calling for more mental health resources, and H-6045 provides a clear, actionable solution.

By passing this legislation, Rhode Island can demonstrate its commitment to the well-being of its students and ensure that **mental health is treated with the same importance as academic achievement**. We urge the committee to **swiftly pass H-6045** and make mental health support a priority in every school across our state.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Rhode Island's students and families.

Parents Leading for Educational Equity