

House Finance Committee
State House
Providence, RI 02903

March 16, 2025

RE: Support of RI HB 7545

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing in support of the above-referenced bill. I was a Providence Public School Social Worker for 32 years. In this capacity, I served the most vulnerable, disadvantaged children in the State of Rhode Island. Social Workers play a critical role in combating chronic absenteeism and providing mental health support. In the post-Covid era, absenteeism is at an all-time high. As a result, students are deprived of critical mental health services. Nowhere was this more acutely felt in Providence. During my career, I witnessed families who experienced homelessness, chronic hunger, physical & mental abuse, gang activity, domestic violence, and incarceration. The need for mental health services increased exponentially during my time in the Providence Public Schools.

For most of my career, I was the only social worker in elementary schools with populations ranging from 500-900 students. In addition, I was often assigned to work as a social worker at two or more different schools in the same school year. Such a high volume of students is unmanageable for any one professional.

The Providence school system has a disproportionate number of special needs students, who were often prone to emotional crises. When multiple students were 'in crisis' at the same time, having only one social worker resulted in the interruption of mental health services for other students. Without enough social workers to serve these students, the sole social worker is forced to prioritize which students' emergency situation is more of a crisis, resulting in the delay of emotional support for any other student in the school building. Teachers, principals, and other non-mental health staff often have to provide interim mental health support to students until the social worker is available. These situations interfere with the duties of the teachers and staff and negatively impact the education of other students. They also drastically reduce the time the sole social worker has for case management (mandatory documentation, referrals for outside mental health evaluations/resources, and professional collaboration) and follow-up with teachers, families, and other professionals.

The RI Department of Education (RIDE) estimates that as of October 1, 2022, the average ratio was 419 students per school social worker. The National Association of School Social Workers (NASW) recommends a ratio of one social worker for every 250 students. Having appropriate social worker-to-student ratio allows teachers to focus on educating students and affords students the opportunity to get proper attention to their academic, social, and emotional needs.

I would ask you to please ensure that students have sufficient access to professional social workers in their schools. Passage of this legislation will help the most vulnerable, disadvantaged children in the State of Rhode Island. Additional school social workers will help combat chronic absenteeism and provide critical mental health support to families who suffer from homelessness, food insecurity, physical and mental abuse, gang activity, domestic violence, and incarceration.

Please pass HB 7545 and allocate the resources necessary to sustain more social workers in our schools.

Respectfully,

Wendy McDermott
School Social Worker (Retired)