



**Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education**

Organizational Testimony in Support of HB 7456

April 28, 2026

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE), we write in strong support of the bill H-7456, which would require one full-time school social worker for every 250 students in Rhode Island public schools by 2030.

Across our work with young people, we are witnessing the deep and ongoing impacts of a student mental health crisis. In 2025, 56% of students in grades 6-12 reported that stress interferes with their ability to participate in school. At the same time, more than one-third of high school students in Rhode Island say they are rarely or never able to access support when they are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or hopeless.

Currently, many school social workers in Rhode Island are responsible for hundreds – sometimes over a thousand students. In some districts, ratios reach as high as 1,600 students per social worker. As one Rhode Island school social worker shared, “I am the only social worker for 1,400 high schoolers. I end up having to prioritize the highest level of mental health needs and services over other supportive interventions.” This means that prevention, relationship-building, and early intervention, which are all core to student wellbeing, are consistently sacrificed.

Young people deserve more than a crisis response. They deserve care, consistency, and the conditions to thrive.

At ARISE, we work with Southeast Asian, immigrant, and BIPOC youth who are navigating layered systems of harm: from underfunded schools, to racialized discipline, to the broader impacts of immigration enforcement and economic instability. In this context, school social workers are often the only trusted adult students can turn to for mental health support, safety planning, and navigating complex personal and family challenges.

National standards recommend a ratio of 1 social worker per 250 students. Rhode Island is far from meeting this baseline. H-7456 is a critical step toward aligning our schools with what students actually need. Investing in school social workers is an investment in educational equity, in mental health, and in the futures of our young people. It is also a recognition that learning cannot happen without wellbeing – that students cannot thrive academically when they are struggling to survive emotionally.

We urge the Committee to pass H-7456 and take meaningful action to support the health, dignity, and success of Rhode Island students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE)