



Testimony Re: S-2078 An Act Relating to Education – The School Libraries Act

Senate Education Committee

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Kelsey Bala, Senior Policy Associate



Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for Senate Bill 2078. We would like to thank Chairwoman Gallo for sponsoring this important act and Senators Tikoian, Ciccone, Gu, DiPalma, Burke, LaMountain, and Murray for co-sponsoring. This act would direct the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education to ensure that every public school has a school library in a permanent and dedicated space and a certified school librarian to manage and maintain the library.

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a milestone for students because it is at this point in their education that they move from learning to read to reading to learn. Students who do not reach this milestone struggle in later grades and are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their proficient peers. When interventions for students who struggle with reading are delayed until after third grade, most children never catch up to their grade level peers. Literacy demands change, and intensify quickly in grades four through 12, as students are expected to comprehend, synthesize, and analyze increasingly complex texts across academic disciplines. Reading skills are also a powerful indicator of a student's ability to contribute to, participate in, and succeed in the workforce and the community.

In Rhode Island in 2024, 38% of third graders and 32% of eighth graders met expectations on the *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)* English language arts assessment. Among low-income students, 24% of third graders and 17% of eighth graders met expectations, compared with 50% of higher-income third graders and 44% of higher-income eighth graders. There were also large disparities by race and ethnicity as well as by language status and disability status.

School libraries play a pivotal role in the academic achievement of our students and are crucial to the public education system. Libraries are where students can access high quality information, grow into lifelong learners, and gain information and media literacy skills. School librarians are also instrumental in teaching students how to evaluate, analyze and interpret sources, as well as help them gain digital literacy skills that are increasingly important in today's age. Librarians are highly trained to cultivate an environment of learning and discovery, and research shows that well-funded and staffed school libraries positively affect student outcomes across geography and socioeconomic status.

Reading increases our perspectives on the world around us which improves both self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Reading books that have characters who might share similar identities/backgrounds to the reader can offer a sense of validation and allow them to gain a deeper understanding of their own self and experiences. Having equitable access to reading materials, informational resources, and school librarians will ensure our students are well equipped for their academic, personal, and future professional development.

Senate Bill 2078 seeks to ensure school libraries and librarians remain accessible, trusted resources to students, and we urge passage. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.