



Testimony Re: S2524 - Relating to Education -- Health and Safety of Pupils -- Student and Teacher Classroom Safety

Senate Education Committee

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice concerns about Senate Bill 2524**, which would provide the authority to remove students from classrooms.

All students need safe and supportive classroom environments to progress academically and developmentally, and this effort needs to include strategies that enhance school climate. **Effective school disciplinary practices promote a safe and respectful school climate, support learning, and address the root causes of student misbehavior.** Punitive disciplinary practices, including exclusionary discipline, are largely ineffective and even counterproductive. Despite this evidence, suspension is a widely used disciplinary technique both nationally and in Rhode Island. Suspension usually does not deter students from misbehaving and may instead reinforce negative behavior patterns. Being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.

Even disciplinary referrals that do not lead to suspension can impact students by weakening trust in teachers and reducing school engagement. It is also a matter of equity. Students receiving special education services only represent 19% of the student population but receive 35% of suspensions, and Black students are more than twice as likely as their white peers to receive a disciplinary referral. Schools and districts can improve school climate and discipline by developing and enforcing disciplinary policies that set high expectations for student behavior; providing clear, appropriate, and consistent consequences for misbehavior; encouraging the use of alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice; and ensuring the equitable, developmentally appropriate, and limited use of suspensions.

In 2019, the United States Commission on Civil Rights reported,

“Research reflects that, in addition to missed class time, excessive exclusionary discipline negatively impacts classroom engagement and cohesion and increases the likelihood excluded students will be retained in grade, drop out of school, or be placed in the juvenile justice system. Research also shows that zero tolerance policies and the practice of exclusionary discipline in schools in the absence of consideration and application of alternatives to exclusionary discipline are ineffective in creating safe and healthy learning environments for students, teachers, and staff.”

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[There is a strong body of research that supports the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#) in classrooms and schools to improve student outcomes, reduce exclusionary discipline, and improve teacher

outcomes. PBIS is an evidence-based, tiered framework that supports students' behavioral, academic, social/emotional, and mental health. PBIS is a research-backed strategy to create positive, predictable, equitable and safe learning environments where everyone thrives, and it is used in classrooms and schools across the country as well as in Rhode Island.

Schools already have strategies to deescalate in classrooms, including the use of PBIS tier supports, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and when a crisis is really severe, the ability to send for greater support. Some specific concerns we have regarding this bill are:

1. The definitions for “disruptive behavior”, “chronically disruptive student” and “immediate threat” appear subjective, and we believe in implementation may lead to racial and ethnic disparities and disparities for students with disabilities, even with the provisions listed in the bill to ward against such.
2. Labeling a student as “chronically disruptive” rather than recognizing them as a child in crisis who is dysregulated, places blame on the student instead of addressing the behavior and underlying factors that triggered the emotional response.
3. Lastly, returning to the classroom only when the return to classroom plan is developed will inevitably lead to delays in learning due to administrative hurdles.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and voice our concerns. We understand the intent of the bill and know that we are all aligned in our desire to provide all students with equal opportunities to receive an **equitable, adequate, meaningful education**. Thank you for all you do on behalf of the children and youth of Rhode Island.