

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Lounay Oliver-Camacho. I am a sophomore at Mount Pleasant High School, and a youth advocate at Young Voices. I am here today to ask you to pass and vote yes on S2245, which would increase the amount of social workers in public schools and provide funding to them. Social workers are essential to the lives of thousands of students in Rhode Island, and I am living proof of that.

My first day of High School, I was completely unprepared, and was wearing what I had woken up with. I had no bookbag, pencils, notebooks, or even the energy to be in school. Nikki Bond, the school social worker came to me non-judgmentally, and supported me through one of the hardest days I've ever been through. Thanks to her knowledge and resources, within the week I had clothes, materials, and a new bookbag. It was her quick action, and unwavering support that led me to continue going to school with a new found strength.

Nikki showed me that I was resilient, resourceful, and most importantly, not alone. She connected me to Young Voices to elevate my voice, and other programs that helped my growth. Without her, I am unsure where I would be today, but I know I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be the advocate that I am today. Just one social worker was able to make that difference for me, but I know I'm just one of the lucky ones to experience this.

Most students in Rhode Island will not have similar stories, because there was no social worker that got to them in time. We cannot allow this to happen. Young people like myself deserve to have the support that they need in their schools, and we can't do that without ensuring that every school has the social workers needed to help their students. I urge you to pass S2245 to support all young people in Rhode Island.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Lounay

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Aliah, I am a student at Mount Pleasant High School and a youth advocate at Young Voices. I am here today to ask for your support in passing Bill S2245.

Throughout my life, I have moved from place to place often. As a result, I have attended many different schools, where I had to start from zero every time. I have noticed that social workers, and their accessibility, are essential for students. Schools should be safe places for everyone: immigrants, students facing mental health challenges, and those who need special education support. Social Workers create those spaces, for youth like me, who can often feel lost and alone in new environments.

There have been multiple times when I needed a social worker, but my old school either did not have enough staff, or had only one social worker responsible for too many students. No young person should ever have to be in that position. Having students only meet with Social Workers occasionally for limited amounts of time harms the relationship of trust between adults and young people. We need to make our schools welcoming and safe, social workers do that.

I should have the knowledge and confidence that I can rely on there to be a specialist at my school to support me, encourage me, and ensure that I have a bright future ahead of me. All students deserve that.

For all these reasons, I urge you all to pass for Bill S2245

Thank you for your time,

Aliah

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Anais, I am a student at Mount Pleasant and a youth advocate at Young Voices, an afterschool program in Providence, RI. I am writing this testimony to ask for your support in passing Bill S2245, which would increase the number of social workers in schools.

I think this bill is beneficial because social workers are very important members of society. There should be social workers everywhere, as they help address issues such as mental health struggles, abuse, domestic violence, and lack of access to resources, these are problems that exist in every community. And just as problems exist, there must be solutions. There should always be someone available to offer support, especially for teenagers who are already facing many other challenges.

For me, the approval of this bill is important because just over a year ago, I went through a difficult personal and family situation. Although the social worker that helped me was not from my school, I was fortunate to have their support. That experience made me realize just how essential social workers are. I think everyone should have access to the kind of support I received, and I wish that social workers had been in a place as accessible as my school, we should have quick and easy access to them.

Please pass S2245 because in the society we live in, full of economic and social inequalities, we need more people who are willing to help and serve others. This is key to the well-being of all.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Anais

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Mason Colon, I am a 9th grader at PCTA and a youth at Young Voices, an afterschool program in Providence, RI. I am here today in support of S2245 which would require all public schools in grades Kindergarten through twelve(K-12), to have at least one full time certified social worker for every 150 students, also giving them \$2,000,000.

The bill is really important to me because I went through a very bad route that was due to my mental health. Many people harm themselves everyday or have bad thoughts, and they don't always have access to the resources they need to get better.

We need to pass this bill because it can save countless priceless lives in Rhode Island. It can possibly improve test scores or grades of students, by making sure everyone feels safe in school and can focus on studying.

Please pass bill S2245 to make schools a better place for all students and save the lives of those struggling with mental health concerns.

Thank you for your time and attention today.

Mason Colon

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Andrea Gonzalez Sanchez. I am here in strong support of Bill S2245, which would provide funding to increase the number of Social Workers in public schools across Rhode Island. I am a Program Manager at Young Voices, a Crisis Counselor at a Suicide Prevention Hotline, and just recently graduated with my BSW.

At 15 years old, my life was saved by my school social worker, Nikki Bond. I am grateful to sit here in front of you as a survivor, because sadly many young people in Rhode Island aren't alive today to tell their stories. Their needs went unnoticed for too long; they never got to meet their Nikki. This may come as a surprise to people, but many schools do not have a designated Social Worker in there daily. These professionals are dividing their time between multiple schools, and might only be available on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Students don't get to choose the days that they are in crisis, so if they are struggling with suicidal thoughts on Wednesday, who will be there for them? If we are serious about addressing the mental health crisis in our schools, then no death to suicide should be acceptable, no matter the day.

In these past years working alongside youth as an educator and a crisis counselor, I have witnessed a tremendous increase in their mental health needs. Youth have told me that they feel hopeless, that they have no one to turn to, that they've been left behind and forgotten. In those moments I do my best to provide them with support, but I know that my reach can only extend so far. We need a vast array of Social Workers that can meet youth emotionally where they are, wherever they are, whenever they are. Social Workers are essential to preserving and improving the lives of students. They are advocates, therapists, and resource coordinators. We need them on the frontlines, to make sure no youth ever has to feel that despair again.

Today, you have a future Social Worker in front of you, one of the hundreds that support this bill and have been advocating for it. There is no lack of will from mental health professionals to see this work done in schools. We recognize it, and the students demand it. Social workers save lives, and so will you by voting yes on this bill. Please allocate the resources that are necessary to sustain more social workers in our schools by passing S2245.

Thank you for your time

Andrea Gonzalez Sanchez

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Yariely Torres Santos, I am a 10th grader at Rhode Island Nursing Institute High School and a youth at Young Voices, an afterschool program in Providence, RI. I am here today in support of S2245 which would require all public schools(K-12) to have at least one full-time certified school social worker for every two hundred and fifty students.

The bill is really important to me because my social worker at school has helped me a lot with my mental health. Without her, I wouldn't have the support I needed to continue being in school and improving myself. Many kids at my school don't have access to the social worker because of her work load, which means many of them are left without the resources that they need to thrive. It worries me to think that so many students can't find the help that they need so desperately, because there is only one social worker in the school.

We need to pass this bill because it would make sure all students have access to social workers and moral support and it would take the stress and workload off of the social workers. I urge you to pass S2245 and help all students in RI.

Thank you for your time and attention today.

Yariely