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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT/AMEND

TESTIMONY ON 26-H 7729, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS March 17, 2026

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this legislation which is designed to prohibit the unlawful use of seclusion rooms within any public pre-kindergarten, elementary, or secondary school in Rhode Island.

Seclusion as school punishment involves leaving a student – often very young children – alone and often in an extremely small space, with the goal of “calming down” the child. In practice, however, this tactic often leaves students traumatized and does little to resolve the situation. Additionally, this practice has historically been used disproportionately on students with disabilities and students with behavioral or emotional needs.¹ These are precisely the students who most need supportive interventions, not isolation.

This practice can have serious consequences and traumatize students. Numerous reports of this practice in other states have noted that seclusion rooms can leave students with post-traumatic stress disorder and a distrust of school and school authorities.² Rather than improving student behavior, this practice does the opposite, damaging the relationship between students and teachers, and undermining the safety that schools should provide.

We note that amendments are being prepared to strengthen the language of the bill and better define what constitutes seclusion. The ACLU supports those amendments, which will help clarify the legislation’s important goal.

By prohibiting the use of seclusion rooms in Rhode Island, this legislation would help encourage Rhode Island schools to employ safer and more effective alternatives to disciplinary isolation and better protect the rights of students with disabilities. We urge its passage in amended form.

Thank you for considering our views.

¹ <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf#page=12>

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/05/726519409/desperation-and-broken-trust-when-schools-restrain-students-or-lock-them-in-room>