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ACLU OF RI POSITION: OPPOSE

TESTIMONY ON 26-H 7731, RELATING TO EDUCATION – HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS March 17, 2026

The ACLU of Rhode Island opposes this legislation which would have the effect of turning all schools, from kindergarten on up, into armed campuses and require the expenditure of enormous amounts of money for security purposes that could be much better spent addressing the social, emotional, and behavioral support services that students need.

We understand that the safety of students is paramount, but the presence of armed officers in every school offers a false sense of security without fundamentally addressing some of the root causes of school safety concerns. We firmly believe that students are better served by increased investment in more specialized personnel such as counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals, who are trained to provide the type of support that can help prevent school violence.

This improperly focused law-enforcement approach is highlighted by other problematic provisions in the bill. For example, it would provide for the creation of a school emergency response committee to facilitate this police presence in schools. However, that committee would have no members of the community serving on it while giving the National Rifle Association two seats at the table!

Further, despite the important public policy considerations that would go into any actions or recommendations emanating from this committee, all of its work could be conducted completely in secret; the committee would be exempted from any of the requirements of both the open meetings law and the Access to Public Records Act. We recognize that such an exemption currently also exists for the “school safety committee” teams currently established by state law, but the ACLU opposed the blanket exemption for that body as well. Perhaps even more troubling, this bill would make a significant change to the safety committee’s purportedly advisory role. Under language appearing on Page 3, line 28, school committees would be required to adopt any school safety plan recommended by the safety committee, usurping the role that school committees should play in this area. It is simply inappropriate for an advisory committee like that one to be able to dictate policy to school committees.

Like the General Assembly, we want students to be safe and to thrive. While we respect the bill’s intent to protect students, we strongly disagree with the approach it offers. We therefore urge that it be rejected. Thank you for considering our views.