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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 21 – H 5827, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – SCHOOL COMMITTEE AND SUPERINTENDENTS March 24, 2021

The ACLU of RI is appreciative of the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this legislation which would require the data gathering and reporting of certain metrics relating to the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) on school campuses. As an organization which opposes the presence of SROs in schools, we feel that this legislation is an important step towards an understanding of the harm that an SRO can inflict on vulnerable students and the campus environment.

Currently, there is no uniformity to the way in which school-based arrests or SRO placement can be accessed by the public, making accountability and oversight of SRO programs complex and burdensome. However, especially in recent years as budgets become tighter, more and more school districts have appeared to rely on SROs to provide extra personnel on campuses which are sorely lacking in appropriate staff with expertise in adolescent social-emotional, mental, and behavioral health, such as social workers, counselors, and school psychologists. There is simply no adequate substitute for the support services that these mental health professionals can provide, and we believe that having comprehensive data surrounding the realities of SRO presence on campus will further support this position.

In just the last year, for example, our organization has filed two lawsuits on behalf of students in Rhode Island who faced violent and inappropriate actions at the hands of their school's SRO. One lawsuit was on behalf of a Black, female, middle-school honors student in Pawtucket who was unlawfully handcuffed and arrested by an SRO; the second was on behalf of a special education student in Narragansett who was thrown the ground by an SRO solely because the student made a rude gesture at the officer. These incidents deserve to be reported, to a central location where families, students, and community members can view the tangible impacts of SRO presence, which can unjustly redefine normal adolescent behaviors into issues of criminal justice.

We would suggest one amendment to the legislation. Given the smaller numbers of students in some districts, it is possible that there may be few enough incidents that the reported data may be suppressed in order to preserve student privacy. This is certainly an important goal, but we also want to ensure that this reporting structure is fully representative of the impact that SROs have on campus. We would encourage that, in such instances where student privacy may be at stake due to low overall numbers of incidents, the data be presented in such a way which still provides an overview of the impact of SRO actions while maintaining student confidentiality.

Thank you for your consideration.

Submitted by: Hannah Stern, Policy Associate