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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 24-H 7545, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – THE EDUCATION EQUITY AND PROPERTY TAX RELIEF ACT

April 30, 2024

The ACLU of RI supports this legislation which would provide \$2,000,000 in funding for the hiring of school social workers. It stands in contrast to other legislation that has been submitted this session that would instead funnel fifteen times this amount of money for school security measures. This bill appropriately recognizes that the personnel most needed and appropriate on school campuses are not law enforcement; rather, they are those with a professional understanding of the unique social-emotional needs of students and adolescents and are available to provide support and counseling.

This committee may remember an incident in 2019 in which, concerned about student behavior, enough teachers at Kickemuit Middle School called out sick that the school was actually closed for the day. In the following days and weeks, teacher after teacher remarked on the rapidly disappearing counseling structures available to students, and their school environment's desperate need for mental and behavioral support services. At the time, however, the school district's immediate action was to instead bring law enforcement, in the form of a school resource officer, into the school to contend with the purported student behavioral issues that had incited the closure.

For many reasons, this avenue was an inappropriate approach to circumstances that clearly necessitated additional psychological support for students. Too often, SROs are relied upon to provide routine school discipline, and the tools that police have at their disposal to combat unruly behavior are often not suited for a school setting. Instead, an increased and concerted emphasis on prioritizing the role of mental and behavioral health staff in schools can and will mitigate and reverse the problems we have thus far seen from the heavy-handed introduction of SROs to schools.

The training that social workers have is much more suited to the vulnerabilities of students and carries a robust understanding of age-appropriate behaviors and actions. Especially for students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students, whose populations are disproportionately affected by disciplinary and enforcement protocol, an increased social service-oriented staff will ensure that behavioral issues rooted in social, psychological, or academic problems are not inappropriately redefined as issues of criminal justice in the manner that the presence of an SRO may prescribe.

During the 2019 legislative session, a school psychologist testifying before Senate Education Committee remarked that the ratio for school counselors to students in Providence was

1 to 1,000-1,500 students, while the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 1 to 250 students, the ratio that this bill would require schools to have for social workers. Personnel with this expertise are desperately lacking in our public school systems, and our schools, teachers, and students are hurting because of it. The prioritization of treatment and services is a critical and necessary step towards an equitable and enriching school system.

As this legislation is currently restricted to the hiring of school social workers, the only amendment we would suggest is to consider expanding the ability for schools to use the allocated funding from this legislation for all mental and behavioral health personnel, including the hiring of counseling professionals. In that regard, we note and commend another bill being heard today, H-7397, which addresses funding for increased mental health professionals in the schools.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.