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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 22 – S 2578, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – SCHOOL COMMITTEE AND SUPERINTENDENTS March 23, 2022

The ACLU of RI is appreciative of the opportunity to support this legislation which would require 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 in the way that school-based arrests or SRO placements 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, even as the schools remain 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 few years, 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. Regardless of one's views on the presence of SROs in school, however, all should welcome the collection of data that this bill envisions in order to better promote enlightened decision-making on the topic.

Thank you for your consideration.

Submitted by: Hannah Stern, Policy Associate