

TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF 20 – H 7171
ARTICLE 10, SECTION 16-7.2-6 (i), REIMBURSEMENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORT STAFF IN SCHOOLS
March 4, 2020

The ACLU of Rhode Island is appreciative of the opportunity to provide our strong support for this section of the FY 2021 Budget, Article 10, section 16-7.2-6 (i), which would extend the reimbursement funding currently available for the hiring of School Resource Officers (SROs) to the hiring of mental health professionals by public schools. As an organization which has consistently opposed the statutory creation of financial incentives for schools to hire SROs over other, more critically required, personnel, we are especially glad to see a deliberate focus on ensuring a pathway for adequate behavioral health services being made more readily available to students.

About a year ago, 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, the most immediate action taken was to bring law enforcement, in the form of a school resource officer, into the school to contend with the purported student behavioral issues which had incited the closure.

For many reasons, this avenue was an inappropriate approach to circumstances which clearly necessitated additional psychological support for students. In many instances, 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. After filing an open records request a few years ago, we discovered that many incident reports arising from student arrests documented examples of escalation of minor infractions (such as wearing a hat in violation of a school dress code) into arrests for open-ended crimes such as disorderly conduct. That is, a police presence often led to arrests for minor misconduct that could and should – and otherwise would – have been treated internally as a school disciplinary matter.

An increased and concerted emphasis on prioritizing the role of mental and behavioral health staff in schools can and will mitigate and reverse the issues which we have thus far seen from the heavy-handed introduction of SROs to schools. The training that these professionals have is much more suited to the vulnerabilities of certain demographics 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 number of mental health staff will ensure that

behavior 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.

Last legislative session, a school psychologist testifying before Senate Education remarked that the current ratio for school counselors to students in Providence is 1 to 1,000-1,500 students – the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 1 to 250 students. Personnel of these 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 over punishment by this budget article is a critical and necessary step towards an equitable and enriching school system; the passage of this legislation will ensure that students are more holistically supported, and that meaningful restorative justice action is occurring in schools. For these reasons, the ACLU encourages swift passage of this legislation.

Thank you for your consideration.