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## **ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT**

### **TESTIMONY ON 23 – S 64, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – THE EDUCATION EQUITY AND PROPERTY TAX RELIEF ACT March 7, 2023**

As an organization that strongly supports the inclusion of mental and behavioral health personnel on school campuses, we are glad to provide commentary in favor of this legislation, which would create a state-level reimbursement structure for newly employed school mental health support staff, including psychologists, counselors, and social workers. A similar reimbursement structure previously existed for the hiring of School Resource Officers, or SROs; however, as the ACLU and many other organizations have consistently testified, the allocation of financial resources is more appropriate when used to provide enhanced social-emotional support services for students. This legislation recognizes this and would helpfully incentivize the increase of psychological personnel on school campuses.

This committee may remember an incident in 2019 in which 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. It is clear that these resources are sorely needed and that they are central to a healthy, enriching, and meaningful educational environment.

The increased inclusion of culturally competent professionals who are trained in the unique behavioral, psychological, and emotional needs of adolescents is an important aspect of addressing student and campus health. For these reasons, we strongly urge support of this bill. Thank you for your consideration.