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## Testimony Re: House Bill 7153 Regarding School Discipline

House Health, Education & Welfare Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 7153. This bill would require school districts to provide alternatives to out-of-school suspensions within a school to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions.

This proposed legislation is clearly intended to ensure that schools have the resources they need to provide appropriate in-school supports for students who have committed a disciplinary infraction.

Over the past several years, Rhode Island has made considerable progress in reducing suspensions, particularly out-of-school suspensions. In 2012, the General Assembly passed legislation that prohibited schools from using a student's absenteeism as the sole basis for an out-of-school suspension. Just last year, during the 2016 session, the General Assembly passed legislation that requires school districts to evaluate the discipline data they already collect annually, identify any racial, ethnic, or special education disparities, develop a plan to reduce any disparities, and **restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions to situations when a child's behavior represents a demonstrable threat to students, teachers, or administrators or causes a serious disruption and the student has failed to respond to corrective and rehabilitative measures presented by staff, teachers, and administrators.**

We are encouraged by the efforts that this body, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and individual school districts have made to reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions and encourage the use of alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). In particular, I want to commend the Rhode Island Department of Education for the many resources that have included on their website including data tools, recommendations regarding alternatives to suspensions, and guidance about how to address disciplinary issues among students receiving special education services --

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/HealthSafety/DisciplineinSchools.aspx>

Since the 2010-2011 school year, the number of out-of-school suspensions has decreased by 52%. While we are pleased by this progress, there is still room for further improvement. During the 2015-2016 school year (the most

recent year for which we have data), there were 24,480 suspensions overall and 48% of these (11,736) were out-of-school suspensions. More than half of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses, such as insubordination/disrespect, disorderly conduct, obscene/abusive language, alcohol/drug/tobacco offenses, and electronic devices/technology offenses.

We welcome proposals such as this one which open the door for continued discussion about barriers to further improving school climate and disciplinary practices and the resources that school districts would need in order to implement further reforms while ensuring that schools are safe and secure places that are conducive to learning.

We hope that after this hearing there will be opportunities for members of the General Assembly, RIDE, school districts, and others to continue this discussion.

In order to support this discussion, we have provided copies of the Suspensions indicator from the *2017 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* as well as copies of two *Policy Snapshots* issued by the Education Commission of the States on this issue just this week. These *Policy Snapshots* provide examples of legislation from other states on the use of alternatives to punitive and exclusionary discipline. These bills have focused on implementing professional development for school personnel, establishing study commissions, and reducing the use of out-of-school suspensions by requiring the use of restorative practices, positive behavioral interventions, and trauma-informed practices.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on this issue over the past several years, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.