



Testimony Re: House Bill H7731- Relating to Education -- Health and Safety of Pupils

House Education 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 our concerns about elements of House Bill H7731.**

In the wake of absolute tragedy that has impacted our community through acts of gun violence, it is incredibly important to ensure horrific tragedies do not plague our communities again. All students need safe and supportive classroom environments to progress academically and developmentally, and this effort needs to include strategies that enhance school climate. We support ensuring our schools are safe for all students.

House Bill H7731 proposes to enhance security measures in our schools by establishing a school emergency response committee. We do not oppose security measures the emergency response committee will report on such as ID access cards, security cameras, security plans, and locked and alarmed doors – all of which schools already use.

We are concerned with the proposal to have a school emergency response committee facilitate the provision of armed security personnel for all kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) schools. **This bill does not specify that the armed security personnel “will be employed only in the event of an emergency”** – so as it is written, this could be interpreted that these armed personnel could be on school campuses at any and all times. Page 3, line 30 states that in the school emergency response committee’s implementation plan, it shall include *“mandating and scheduling of armed police coverage for schools.”* **Unless the intent of this language is to have armed police consistently patrolling all schools, it should be made clear that there would be police personnel scheduled to cover in the event of an emergency, and that they would not be a constant presence.** Even though the committee is named as the school “emergency response” committee, it is not clear if armed security personnel will only be deployed in the event of an emergency, nor does it define “emergency.” **It is well-documented that the presence of police in and around schools has led to increased criminalization of our youth and particularly our youth of color.**

This bill also allocates \$1M a year in funding for school security and SWAT teams – (Page 4, lines 2-3 specify that \$500,000 shall be included in the state budget annually for armed police coverage. Page 4, lines 21-23 specify that \$500,000 shall be included in the state budget annually for the procurement of SWAT team weapons and equipment and training.)

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The National Education Association reports that hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on school hardening methods, with little evidence

they have achieved the intended reduction in violence, specifically firearm violence.

[In the U.S., firearms are the leading cause of death among children and youth ages one to 19, surpassing motor vehicle deaths.](#) American children and youth are 21 to 23 times more likely to be killed by a gun than their peers in other high-income countries. However, [researchers have investigated methods for eradicating school shootings perpetrated by young people and concluded that one of the best strategies was to prevent young people from gaining access to firearms in the first place.](#) The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends public policies to protect children from gun injuries and violence through safe firearm storage and bans on assault weapons.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and voice our concerns. We know that we are all aligned with the desire to provide all students with equal opportunities to receive an **equitable, adequate, meaningful education in a safe environment**, but we do not believe this bill gets us there. Thank you for all you do on behalf of the children and youth of Rhode Island.