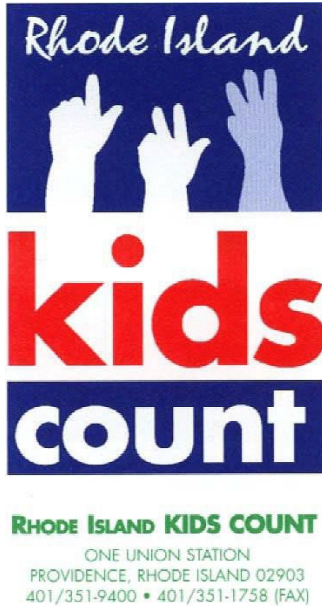




**Testimony Re: House Bill 7456 - AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION:
THE EDUCATION EQUITY AND PROPERTY TAX RELIEF ACT – Social
Workers in Schools**

House Finance Committee

April 28, 2026

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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 7456 and thank Representative Shallcross Smith for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Furtado, Diaz, Fellela, Serpa, Tanzi, and Kislak for co-sponsoring. This bill would require all public schools, in grades kindergarten through 12, to have at least one full-time certified school social worker for every 250 students and provide for an appropriation by the General Assembly of \$2 million in the budget for Fiscal Year 2027.

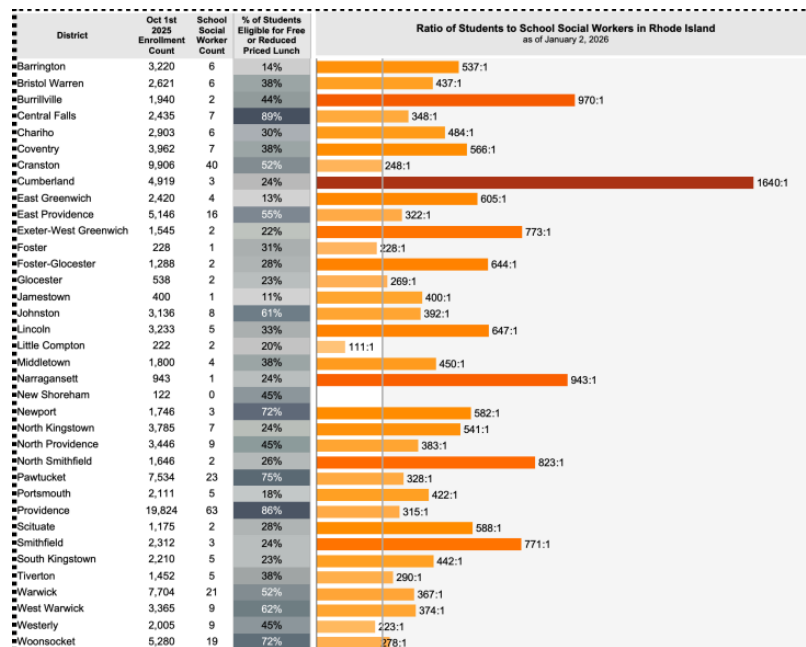
Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, school, and in the community. Untreated mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the youth justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk of suicide.

In the U.S. and Rhode Island, the impact of COVID-19 increased the mental health needs of students. As a result, in 2022, the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Rhode Island Council of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hasbro Children's Hospital, and Bradley Hospital joined together to declare the Rhode Island State of Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. **One of the six policy recommendations issued by the group included implementing sustainable funding for effective models of school-based mental health care with clinical strategies.**

In 2023, 36% of Rhode Island high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for more than two weeks during the past year. Girls were twice as likely as boys to report these feelings. In Rhode Island, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (60%) and youth who identified as other or questioning (71%) were more than twice as likely to report persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness compared to their heterosexual peers (26%). Additionally, 9% of Rhode Island high school students reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year. Rates were more than four times higher among LGB youth (37%) and other or questioning youth (41%) than for heterosexual youth.

In the U.S., students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health than community mental health centers. This is especially true in school districts in areas with a high concentration of poverty.

School social workers provide mental health support in school and are experts in addressing students' social and emotional needs. They often are the primary mental health professionals for students and are accessible to students and their families, offering crucial support in identifying mental health challenges and starting interventions to support students' mental health wellness.



The School Social Work Association of America recommends a ratio of **one social worker for every 250 students**. Many districts in Rhode Island are far from meeting the recommended 1:250 social worker to student ratio. In **Cumberland**, one social worker is responsible for **1,640 students**. In **Burrillville**, there are **970 students per social worker**, and in **Narragansett** and **North Smithfield**, there are over **800 students per social worker**. It is important to note that the data reflect staffing as of January 2, 2026, and may not capture any hires made after that date. However, even with potential staffing changes, the data highlight a clear and urgent gap in our school-based mental health system. Social workers are stretched too thin and are often forced into crisis response rather than providing early support.

In partnership with the National Association of Social Workers, Massachusetts and Rhode Island Chapters, we gathered information on what the day-to-day work of school social workers looks like. In addition to meeting with students to support their mental health needs, school social workers are also expected to cover IEP and 504 plan meetings, participate in MTSS meetings, split their time between multiple schools, and run social-emotional learning groups, among many other responsibilities. These demands make it even more challenging to support the growing number of students experiencing homelessness, deportation, or fear of deportation.

Feelings of safety and connection with the school are the most important school climate factors for promoting and protecting students' mental and emotional well-being. Social workers and other

school-based mental health professionals play an essential role in creating and sustaining positive school climates. They can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement, and career preparation, and lower suspension rates and other disciplinary incidents.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports efforts to increase the availability of mental health professionals in schools. These investments will help ensure our children's safety and physical and emotional well-being. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.