

5165

Good evening Chairman McNamara and members of the Committee. My name is Jillian Waugh, I live in Newport, and I am the School Library/Media Specialist at Portsmouth Middle School. I am here to testify in support of House Bill 5165 which would establish a safety and behavioral health committee in every school district.

I've been working in education for 22 years, and as a school librarian, I see every student in my building. Reading, and reading well, is one of the best predictors of student success. I love being part of my students' reading journey, but I also see firsthand the growing struggles our students face.

The student mental health crisis is changing our classrooms and schools. Many students become dysregulated and turn to lashing out, throwing objects, or in some intense cases, forcing a "shelter in place" to protect students. Others completely withdraw – and a good story that once engaged them no longer does. Attention, communication and conflict resolution are a growing challenge in the classroom, making it difficult to meet the needs of 25 different students.

Paraprofessionals and social workers can help students, but we don't have enough of them. At my school, if they are out sick, often there is no sub for them, making an already difficult situation worse. We need to hire and retain more staff to ensure consistency in student wellbeing and behavioral health across districts.

This legislation would ensure that we are all paying attention to the needs of our students and working together as a school community to address these issues. When educators, support staff, and administrators collaborate regularly, we can create and enforce clear policies to support our students.

All RI students deserve a safe, high-quality, and engaging education. Those struggling with their mental health and behavioral health need extra support so that learning is not disrupted for them – or their classmates.

Thank you.

Jillian Waugh