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Thank you, Chairperson Lathrop and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Julie Erickson and today I am representing Voices for Children in Nebraska in opposition of LB 417.

Education is a key indicator of future opportunity for children, and we should make every effort to ensure that our education system is setting students up for success. Voices for Children opposes LB 417, which would authorize the possession of a firearm on school grounds by an SRO, because there is no evidence that arming school officers increases overall safety.

Proposals to arm SROs are borne of a desperate concern for the safety of students but arming school resource officers is the too-simple default response to a complex issue that will put students at greater risk, not make them safer. In Nebraska, we lack annual, statewide systemic data on student interactions with law enforcement at school. However, we know that best practices support responding to student misbehavior wherever possible with disciplinary approaches to keep the student in the educational environment. Students who are pushed out, whether by suspensions, expulsions, or arrests, experience disruption in their education that can lead to reduced educational attainment and increased likelihood of court involvement. The risk is potentially greater when we involve sworn law enforcement and security guards in the school environment and authorize them to possess deadly weapons. These policy and practice choices, all too often, fall disproportionately on students of color, who are more likely to be subject to frequent and harsher punishment, placed in alternative disciplinary schools or settings, referred to law enforcement or subject to school-related arrest, and fail to graduate from high school.

The most immediate impact of arming school police would be felt by students, as school-based police spend the bulk of their time interacting with students in nonemergency situations. Having officers patrol the hallways with firearms sends a negative message to students. It makes many students feel that they are being treated like suspects. It can have an intimidating presence and can contribute to negative attitudes about police, in general. Unarmed school staff and law enforcement does not mean that schools are defenseless in emergency situations. School districts have arrangements, formal or informal, with local law enforcement in which outside assistance is provided when needed in emergencies, such as when there is a bomb threat or serious injury.

Emerging best practices aim to reduce police involvement in routine disciplinary school matters, ensure fairness in disciplinary processes, and increase the ratio of school counselors to law enforcement. There is no evidence to demonstrate that arming SRO's increases overall safety or improves relationships with school communities. We oppose LB 417 and continue to advocate for policy that focuses on building a positive school community, implementing preventive and positive approaches to discipline, and building a culture of respect and communication between students, school staff, and parents.

 We thank the Committee for your time and consideration on this important matter and we respectfully urge you to not advance LB 417.