



April 5, 2013

Madame Chair Gelser and Members of the Committee,

For the record my name is Vicki Harlos. I am licensed by the state of Oregon as both a school administrator and a clinical social worker. For the past sixteen years I have worked at Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District in Albany. I am currently assigned as the Program Administrator for Student and Family Support Services. I supervise Behavior Consultants, Family Support Liaisons and Attendance Officers who provide outreach and intervention for students, and their families, who are experiencing a wide range of barriers to their success in school, including mental health challenges.

House Bill 3474 provides our state with an opportunity to help schools and families partner to identify children and teens who struggle every day with symptoms of mental health disorders. These youth may feel tired, unhappy and depressed. They may develop low self-esteem, feel restless and irritable and may not be enjoying their young lives. They may have difficulty relating to their peers and their symptoms may be causing stress in their relationships at home. They may feel very isolated and confused by what they are experiencing. These children may not be so easily identified in a classroom setting. They may not display behavioral challenges and may go about their day without causing any disruption. They may be reluctant to talk to anyone at home or at school about their symptoms because of the negative stigma attached to mental health disorders in our society.

This bill would be an important step toward reaching out to these youth and identifying their challenges early so that an effective level of support and intervention can be made available to them. It would contribute to current efforts in schools and communities around our state to decrease the stigma attached to mental health disorders. Just like students and families can feel confident that their child has an opportunity to be screened for hearing and vision problems and will be respected and supported when they are identified as needing glasses or hearing aids, I hope we can move in the direction of identifying youth who are struggling with symptoms of brief or more chronic mental health conditions and ensure they experience understanding and respect for the challenges they face.

I am the Co-Chair of the Linn County Council for Integrated Services to Children and Families. Although I am not representing this inter-agency collaborative group of school superintendents and agency administrators with my testimony, I can tell you that over the past two years the mental health of youth in Linn County has become a priority for our work together. The goal of our Council is for Linn County youth to be "safe, healthy, at home, in school and out of trouble."

We are concerned about the fact that on the 2011-2012 Student Wellness Survey 23.6% of our 8th grade students reported they felt "sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row," and 17.8% of these students reported they had "seriously considered attempting suicide in the past twelve months." In fact, we have lost two young people to suicide in Linn County over the past year. Although access to mental health screening will not guarantee we identify every student experiencing emotional distress, it is another important opportunity for us to do so.

This bill does not require schools to screen students for mental health disorders. It does not require parents to allow their child to be screened. However, it certainly simplifies the process for schools who choose to ensure youth have access to a universal health screening opportunity that may be a first step in identifying and removing a barrier to their overall healthy development and may result in significant improvement in the quality of their life. As an educator and social worker who has been involved in serving many children suffering with mental health challenges, I sincerely hope you will move to pass HB 347~~9~~.

Respectfully submitted,



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