

Date March 24, 2021

Senator Michael Dembrow, Chair
Senate Committee on Education

RE: Support Senate Bill 782

Chair Dembrow and members of the committee,

Thank you for meeting with us today. My name is Kelly Park, and I am a high school senior from Portland, Oregon and a member of Students for a Healthy Oregon. Three years ago, I began working at the Oregon YouthLine, a teen-to-teen crisis line that provides support for youth dealing with mental health struggles, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

In order to become a YouthLine volunteer, over fifty hours of training is required. During this training, we are taught how to connect teens to resources and support systems in their lives. Countless times, I have asked contacts if they have access to a school counselor or mental health professional, and countless times, I have heard individuals say that their schools do not have the quality or quantity of counselors to support them during times of hardship. They also point to a lack of mental health awareness in their high schools from both peers and adults. Failure to provide adequate treatment and support for students with mental health struggles can result in several consequences later in life, including the inability to complete education, unemployment, and increased medical expenses. For these reasons, I'm here today to ask for your support for Senate Bill 782. I believe that leaders like you, who care about the wellbeing of students, can support the implementation of mental health screenings in Oregon schools.

Over fifty percent of mental health conditions begin during early adolescence; therefore, high school is a critical time for students and to recognize these symptoms in themselves and their peers, receiving support before a crisis occurs. This is especially relevant during a pandemic, as times of collective uncertainty result in noticeable increases in youth anxiety and depression.

Oftentimes, when we talk about mental health treatment, we speak about it from intervention and postvention points of view. Senate Bill 782 is necessary, because it takes on a different angle: prevention. Prevention ensures that the 1 in 6 teenagers who have contemplated suicide in the last year receive support before ideation turns into action. Mental health screenings in schools will equip students and adults with the tools needed to prevent and address mental health struggles through recognizing early signs and symptoms.

As a volunteer on a crisis and support line, I know that these numbers are more than troubling statistics; they are real people. We believe that this mental health screening pilot program has the power to equip individuals and communities with the tools they need to prevent youth suicides across Oregon.

Thank you again for your time and continued support of Senate Bill 782. It is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Kelly Park
Students for a Healthy Oregon and YouthLine