

24 March 2021
Department of Education

Ref: SB782

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chairs and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience, and for your consideration of SB782. My name is Sophia Sivers. I'm a senior in high school, and I volunteer with YouthLine, a teen-to-teen crisis support line. A common theme that arises in my conversations with peers on the lines is a feeling of shame around their suffering. Contacts feel guilty that they can't get their homework done, that they were irritable with their friends, that they can't sit still in class, that they can't get out of bed to get to school, that they don't want to live anymore. They express a sense that something is wrong with them, but can't quite place what. The stigma that surrounds mental health stops them from getting the support they need.

Even once students know to reach out for help, it isn't always readily available to them. As it is now, the expenses associated with psychological testing only afford some students the opportunity to be evaluated when they are struggling. This inaccessibility leads to disparities between students who have attained help and those who have not. When untreated, mental illness can find its way into every area of a person's life, in and beyond the classroom. Mental health screenings within schools would close these highly inequitable gaps between those who can afford formal support and those who cannot.

Throughout my high school experience, I have been faced with mental wellness obstacles that have impaired my academic performance and my ability to cope at school. For months, I suffered silently, not fully understanding my illness. When I gathered up the strength to reach out to a school counselor for accommodations, I was denied them for lack of a full psychological evaluation that my family could not afford. If screenings had been in place, I could have gotten the support I needed even before I had reached such a debilitating spot. Regularly, the contacts that reach out to me at YouthLine express a similar lack of support in their learning environments. They describe counselors who prioritize academics over mental wellness, teachers who don't seem to understand why a student is struggling, and learning environments that feel unsafe.

It's easy to assert that schools have no place interfering in or upkeeping the mental health of their students. But wellness and efforts to maintain it are a constant force in every student's life, mentally ill or not. Students in crisis should not be expected to relentlessly prove themselves in order to get basic help. The best way to support these students is to take preventative measures. That is where SB782 comes in. Mental health screenings in schools would provide a platform for students to express any difficulties they may be having. It would prompt a collaboration between students and administrators by which the student is directed toward the support they deserve. Eradicating the barriers to psychological testing would allow for all students to thrive, both emotionally and academically. For these reasons, I testify in support of SB782.

Respectfully,

Sophia Sivers
Youthline Volunteer