

Date: January 30, 2023
To: House Committee on Education
From: Stephanie Phillips Bridges, Policy Analyst for the Urban League of Portland
Re: Mental Health Training, HB 2646

Chair Neron, Vice-Chair Hudson, Vice-Chair Wright, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Stephanie Phillips Bridges, and I am a Policy Analyst with the Urban League of Portland and I respectfully submit this testimony in support of House Bill 2646. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

According to the 2022 Kids Count Data Book, "Oregon ranked 26 out of 50 states (worse category) for overall child well-being. This ranking was determined by looking at four indicators that impact mental health."¹ The 2022 Kids Count Data Book shares that "in the 2000s, experts estimated that 14%–20% of young people in America were experiencing a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder at any given time. Conditions for the current generation appear to be worse. The coronavirus upended everyday life to an extent not seen since World War II; millions of parents, caregivers, and other adults felt overwhelmed. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said in 2021 there is a "mental health pandemic" for the youth."² While White households were dealing with COVID-19 pandemic challenges, households of color had to deal with those same challenges coupled with increased racism, like hate crimes and health injustices related to COVID-19 and police brutality. Black adults and youth marched across the nation for Black Lives Matter with the hopes of racial justice and liberation.

The Racism Endemic: Addressing the Impact of a Social Virus on BIPOC Youth presentation by Providence Children's Health explains that racism "physically and mentally impacts youth, particularly Black youth. The impacts of racism on mental health include major stress (a traumatic experience) that can lead to internalizing and externalizing problems like anxiety, depression, behavioral disorders, and PTSD. As well as increased depression and suicide ideation, which is even worse among BIPOC youth. Suicide rates among Black youth have increased by 60% for boys and 182% for girls in the past 15 years. Providence Children's Health also reports there are inequities in the labeling and diagnosing of mental health disorders in BIPOC youth; children and families who have experienced racism were less likely to be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and developmental disabilities."³

While youth dealt with difficulties at home during the pandemic, they had to face issues that commonly occur at school. Issues like racism, discrimination, cyberbullying, harassment, bullying, violence in various forms, and intimidation. The 2022 Kids Count Data Book reports "nearly a quarter of parents with children ages 6 to 17 said their child had been bullied in the previous year. About 1 in 5 kids reportedly struggled to make friends. In 2021, 68% of parents agreed their child would benefit from mental health counseling, that number rose to 73% in early 2022."⁴ The Oregon Health Authority completed a scan of local agencies providing clinical mental health services in schools in July and August of 2022. The results showed "roughly 50 local agencies across Oregon currently partner with 114 school districts. And

¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022 Kids Count Data Book: State Trends in Child Well-Being, 2022.

² Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022 Kids Count Data Book: State Trends in Child Well-Being, 2022.

³ Providence Children's Health, The Racism Endemic: Addressing the Impact of a Social Virus on BIPOC Youth presentation by Providence Children's Health, 2022.

⁴ Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022 Kids Count Data Book: State Trends in Child Well-Being, 2022.

those agencies employ mental health clinicians to provide therapy and crisis intervention services in roughly 440 schools in urban and rural areas.”⁵

The Oregon Department of Education reported in 2021-2022 there are “546,238 students enrolled in school statewide, 12,674 of which are Black students.”⁶ ““In Oregon, the ratio of school counselors in schools is 374 students to 1 counselor,” said Jennifer Wagley, CEO and Executive Director of Our Children Oregon,”⁷ in an article by the Statesman Journal in 2022. “The American School Counselor Association says schools should try to maintain a ratio of 250 students to 1 counselor,”⁸ as shared in the article by the Statesman Journal in 2022. There is a desperate need for mental health services for the youth, especially Black youth who have an added layer of dealing with mental health issues racism creates. HB 2646 can help address the mental health challenges Oregon’s youth face. HB 2646 requires the Department of Education to provide a program to train school employees on signs and symptoms of mental illness, psychiatric or psychological disorder, depression or substance abuse disorder, de-escalating mental health or substance use disorder crisis, and assisting students in crisis. By training school employees to recognize signs and symptoms of mental illness, students will likely receive support from an individual they interact with daily and that provides a safe space.

With HB 2646, school districts will designate mental health points of contact to coordinate and facilitate access for youth and their families to appropriate mental health and substance abuse disorder services and resources. Creating a designated mental health point of contact, schools will be prepared when mental health crises arise, which could be crucial when lives are at stake. With more mental health services in schools, seeking services for mental health will be normalized; this will help Black youth as seeking mental health services has a stigma in the Black community.

Please pass HB 2646 to provide mental health services to the youth at the place they spend the most time: school. Oregon's youth depend on your support to address the “mental health pandemic”, especially the Black youth across Oregon.

Respectfully,



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⁵ Oregon Health Authority, Statewide Scan of Local Agencies Providing Clinical Mental Health Services in Schools fact sheet, 2022.

⁶ Oregon Department of Education, Student Enrollment Reports, 2022.

⁷ Statesman Journal, Kids in Oregon, Nationwide 'Definitely Are More Stressed,' New Report Shows, 2022.

⁸ Statesman Journal, Kids in Oregon, Nationwide 'Definitely Are More Stressed,' New Report Shows, 2022.