

Testimony – Support

Bill Number: HB 365
Bill Subject: Voluntary Mental Health Screening in Schools
Sponsor: Representative Bill Jones
Committee: House Appropriations
Room: 102
Time: Upon Adjournment

Testimony:

Mr. Chair and members of the Committee, for the record my name is Bob Runkel, Assistant Superintendent, Office of Public Instruction, representing Linda McCulloch, State Superintendent.

The Office of Public Instruction is in support of House Bill 365.

I want to start by talking about a few unsettling facts.

Montana has one of the highest teen suicide rates in the country.

The National Center for Chronic Disease and Health Promotion, a Division of the Centers for Disease Control, reported that in Montana, almost as many teens die by suicide as those who die from all natural causes. Stop to think about that. For all the worries that we as parents have for our children getting some dread disease, it is the chance of suicide that is nearly as great as the number of teens who die from all natural causes.

The 2005 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that Montana's High School students exceeded the national comparison group in the following 4 areas:

- Seriously considered attempting suicide during the past 12 months (MT 17.5% vs. US 16.0 %)
- Made a suicide plan (MT 14.6% vs. US 13.1%)
- Attempted suicide one or more times (MT 10.3% vs. US 8.8%) Think about that, two students in a typical classroom of 20.
- Attempted suicide that required medical treatment ((MT 3.1% vs. US 2.7%)

- 26% of Montana high school students felt sad and hopeless enough over a two week period that they halted usual activities.
- This is not a new problem. 30 years ago, when I served Montana schools as a school psychologist, the possibility of a suicide in one of my schools was one of my biggest worries. Of all of my responsibilities, my worry was it might occur on my watch.
- Early identification of depression and other mental health concerns may help to reduce the number of young people who engage in self-destructive behavior and with the exception of a parent; no one is better situated than a teacher to recognize these signs and to initiate steps for intervention.
- Research has established that mental health greatly affects academic achievement in educational outcomes. Anxious or depressed students are proven to have lower levels of school performance, school connectedness and poor peer and teacher relationships.
- Proper training for teaching and support staff members may improve student outcomes and even more importantly help to save pupil's lives and save families, friends, and the community the trauma resulting from a young person's actions. And this is what this bill is all about.
- Here is what this bill will do:
 - It will provide OPI with the ability to deliver voluntary training and technical assistance to those schools that request it. The target audience is school personnel serving school children ages 11 through 18.
 - The bill will allow those schools that volunteer to participate, the tools and knowledge to correctly implement an early identification and prevention program. OPI will provide information to schools on:
 - Tools that are useful for early identification;

- Methods which highlight children who might be at risk;
 - Follow-up procedures by school staff for high risk children including how to inform parents, the availability of community resources, and how to help parents in their decision on the next step.
- The bill will also support OPI's efforts to collaborate with existing community-based suicide prevention programs supported through DPHHS. This will provide an important link through the school system to support DPHHS efforts in this area.
- It is important to keep in mind what this bill does not require:
- It does not require mandatory participation by students, parents or schools.
 - It does not provide diagnosis or treatment.
- All too often we have painful examples of the impact of teen suicide on families, schools and our communities. Our kids are killing themselves.
- I wish to thank Representative Jones for his courage in bringing this issue before the public and to provide you, as committee members, the opportunity to act on a bill that will help our schools and the Office of Public Instruction address this critical issue.