

Senator Mike Dunleavy
State Capitol, Room 11
Juneau, AK 99801

February 23, 2016

Dear Senator Dunleavy,

My name is Michelle Hook and I am the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) of North Star Behavioral Health System. Three of our facilities are dedicated to serving up to 160 children at a time in acute care and residential programs. Many of these patients have the most extreme behavioral health needs in Alaska and our facilities provide the only inpatient behavioral health beds in the entire state for children under the age of 12. Our services support families in crisis here in Alaska, so that their children are not sent for treatment out of state. We routinely receive admissions from all areas in Alaska and work with local and remote medical providers to deliver care for their patients.

I am writing to request your support for Education Funding Equality for Children with Mental Illness (SB103). This very important legislation will support children who are receiving intensive mental health treatment, by providing them with comparable and equitable educational services.

I would like to be on record in support of this legislation. My 18 years of caring for mentally ill patients as a psychiatric nurse inform my opinion that this legislation will:

- Reduce stress among patients and their families regarding a disruption or delay in their educational progress. Parents will not have to choose between getting medical help for their children or keeping them in school
- Help “normalize” the experience of suffering through mental illness. Being able to continue one’s education while receiving mental health treatment can help reduce the negative impact mental illness can have and strengthen self esteem
- Provide financial accountability by requiring school districts to send a portion of any funding that would normally be part of the funding formula from their public school at home for the specific days of school attendance
- Support licensed facilities in delivering appropriate educational services provided by licensed teachers while the student is also receiving essential mental health services which provides more seamless continuity of care

I have been so pleased to see the children move throughout their day attending school classes here in the hospital as well as receiving mental health care. I believe each of these activities can complement each other so effectively. I stopped by a classroom here at the hospital the week after the most recent earthquake and the teacher was explaining earthquakes in a scientific way. It was the perfect opportunity to educate the children while also helping reduce their anxiety.

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If the Senate and House Education Funding Equality for Children with Mental Illness Bill were passed by the legislature and signed into law by the Governor, this would strongly support mentally ill children and their families in obtaining much needed mental health services while minimizing the impact to their education. Being mentally ill should not also mean a child must fall behind in school.

I respectfully request you to support the Education Funding Equality for Children with Mental Illness Senate Bill as it will greatly improve the ability of children with severe mental illness to concurrently receive educational services and mental health care.

With Kind Regards,

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