

Good morning Co-Chairs and members of the committee, and thank you for the opportunity to testify, as well as thank you to Representative Claman for introducing this bill. I'm speaking wholeheartedly in support of HB 60.

My name is Natalie Fraser and I live in Anchorage. I'm a recent graduate of West Anchorage High School, I'm a daughter, a friend, and I'm also someone who deals with a mental health condition.

Growing up, I didn't have knowledge about what depression or other mental health conditions looked like, and neither did my family. Despite meeting every state health curriculum requirement, none of us had ever had any formal education on mental health. I believed, like so many people do, that mental illness is something other people have. I continued to believe that until I made an attempt on my own life.

In the aftermath, the knowledge that saved my life didn't come from my family, or my classes, or from my peers (because they didn't have it either) it came from the dedicated efforts of the suicide prevention program run by a West Math teacher. Mental Health Education is effective. It works. But it's rare, and it's not institutionalized.

I stand here today representing so much of the educational goals we set— I'm in college, I want to work as a doctor or epidemiologist, my life is full of passions and joys, and I get to use my voice to stand up for myself and others. And also— so much of that was almost lost because I wasn't taught the knowledge that would keep me healthy.

Last year, on March 6th, I stood before this committee and gave testimony about the importance of educating our students on mental health-- in the year since, the pandemic has reaffirmed this need over and over again. Every single day, as a student, as an advocate, as a friend, I see the ways in which our health curriculum has failed to prepare its students for their individual mental health struggles, let alone a collective mental health crisis. Three weeks ago, one of my friends from high school died by suicide. I'm worried about the thousands of students who are struggling right now, uneducated, and I'm worried about their outcomes.

The Alaska State Education system taught me how to communicate my ideas clearly. It taught me about the structure of government, and how bills are passed. It taught me the importance of being a thoughtful and concerned citizen, and therefore, I ask our education system to teach one more thing: mental health is health, and it should be treated as such.

For all of these reasons, please support HB 60, and thank you.

Natalie Fraser

My name is Claire Moreland, I am a 15 year old student at West Anchorage High School and I wish to present to you today why HB 60 is so necessary and vital to the wellbeing of our students. Mental health is not something to scoff at, to push under the rug. For too long, there has been an intense stigma around mental health and that has served as a barrier to those who need help getting the help that they need and deserve. I myself have struggled for nearly half of my life with depression and anxiety. When I was in 5th grade, I started to become depressed and hopeless. I would sob to my mother about how lonely I was, how terrible the world seemed, and how it felt like things would never get better. I had no

idea there was a name for what I was feeling, that there were resources to help me, or that this terrible feeling that just inundated me would ever go away. My story is by no means unique either, I know dozens of people who have struggled with their mental health, almost all of my close friends struggle with anxiety, depression, both, or something else that affects their mental health. We all grew up in a school system that provided no resources to help with those struggles, that seemed as though it didn't care if we felt like dying. We turned to the internet, to online quizzes to see if there was a name for what we felt, and ultimately had no resources to make it stop or at least make it better. Those resources are there though, we just didn't know they were there. I am now on medication for my depression and my anxiety and it has completely revolutionized my world. I have more energy, I can feel truly happy again, and I can just function as myself once more. I struggled for years, I lost nearly half of my childhood because I didn't know that there was even a name for what I was feeling, much less a way to help it, and I never want any other child to feel the same way that I did. So I beseech you, please, please, pass this bill. Pass this bill for the wellbeing of the children of Alaska, pass it for your daughters, your sons, your nephews and nieces, pass it for their future and for the future of our state. You have the power to make a real change in the lives of thousands of children, and I ask that you please use it to make their lives better.

Thank you,
Claire Moreland