

**From: Nan Voorhees**

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**To: The Alaska State Legislature Senators and Representatives** State Capitol Building, Juneau, AK 99801

February 1, 2025

**Re: Support for Senate Bill 41 – Mental Health Education for Alaska’s Youth**

I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 41, which aims to promote mental health education into Alaska’s K-12 curriculum. As a parent of two children (in kindergarten and third grade) and as a social worker, I see firsthand the urgent need for early mental health education to equip our children with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate challenges and seek help when necessary.

Alaska’s youth face some of the highest rates of mental health challenges in the nation, including depression, anxiety, and suicide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that suicide remains one of the leading causes of death among Alaskan youth, with rates continuing to rise (CDC, 2023). Children as young as ten years old are seeking emergency care after suicide attempts (DeMarban, 2023). The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association have declared a national emergency in children’s mental health, emphasizing the need for action (AAP, AACAP, & CHA, 2021).

Senate Bill 41 is an important step towards encouraging schools to provide Alaska’s students with age-appropriate mental health instruction. Schools have provided physical health to students for decades. It’s time that children’s mental health is taken just as seriously. This legislation will:

- **Reduce stigma** surrounding mental health conditions (NAMI, 2023)
- **Promote early intervention** by equipping students with coping strategies and knowledge of available resources (SAMHSA, 2024)
- **Enhance academic outcomes** by supporting students’ emotional well-being (NCSL, 2024)
- **Help prevent crises** before they escalate (US Surgeon General Advisory, 2021)

As a social worker, I understand the **devastating consequences of unaddressed mental health struggles** – not only for individuals but for entire families and communities. Leveraging school-based mental health programs has proven effective in addressing gaps in the mental health system and ensures children are supported early, effectively, and equitably. break cycles of trauma, improve resilience, and **save lives**.

Many states who recognize that mental health is just as vital as physical health have already adopted similar legislation. **Nine states, including New York, Virginia, and Florida, have mandated mental health education in schools**, while at least **20 others have incorporated it into their health education standards** (EdGate, 2023). By passing SB 41, Alaska can join these states in prioritizing the mental well-being of its youth (EdWeek, 2018).

Why do schools recognize the need for physical health education but not mental health education? Topics and conversations related to mental health are important. SB 41 allows for the development of an age-appropriate and effective curriculum. Thank you for your time, leadership, and commitment to the well-being of Alaska’s youth.

Sincerely,

Nan Voorhees

## References

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- U.S. Surgeon General Advisory (2021). *Protecting Youth Mental Health: Advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General*. Retrieved from: [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS\\_Data-Summary-Trends\\_Report2023.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023.pdf)
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Dear members of the Senate Education Committee and SB 41 sponsor Senator Gray-Jackson,

Last Session, the President of the Anchorage School Board wrote a letter in support of SB 24 (regarding mental health instruction) on behalf of the Anchorage School Board. On April 11th, I followed up with my own, individual support for that bill as a member of the Anchorage School Board by writing to the House Health and Social Services Committee to alert that body that the Anchorage School Board's strong support for embedding mental health education within the District's health curriculum was clearly evidenced in its then-recent, unanimous approval of Board Policy 5041, a new Health Education Policy for the Anchorage School District, during the Board's meeting on Tuesday April 9<sup>th</sup> 2024.

This policy was attached to [Memorandum 131](#), which stated that "The Anchorage School Board recognizes that the delivery of comprehensive, effective, and age-appropriate K-12 health education in all District schools plays a critical role in supporting academic outcomes and reducing adolescent health risks."

Once again, I'd like to draw this Committee's attention to ASD's new policy's language, which asserts that mental health education is a key component within a comprehensive health curriculum:

"Key components of a comprehensive health curriculum include the following:

Injury Prevention & Personal Safety

Functions of the Body

Nutrition

Community Health and Safety (Violence Prevention)

**Self-worth, Mental and Emotional health**

Growth and Development

Substance Abuse Prevention

Diseases and Illness Prevention

Environmental and Consumer Health

Physical Fitness."

Although ASD can clearly use the principal of local control to support its students' health and wellbeing (including mental health), I believe that Senator Gray-Jackson's bill (SB 41) is poised to help all students across the State in meaningful ways. This is especially true given the degree of student mobility between and among districts and the well-documented mental health challenges plaguing youth across Alaska, which I believe create a strong rationale for your support in amending statute so as to mandate the creation of guidelines for developmentally appropriate mental health education statewide.

Thank you for your support of SB 41.

Sincerely,

Kelly Lessens

Anchorage School Board

**Alaska Children's Trust**

[alaskachildrenstrust.org](http://alaskachildrenstrust.org) ■ (907) 248-7676 ■ [kidsfirst@alaskachildrenstrust.org](mailto:kidsfirst@alaskachildrenstrust.org)

Senate Education Committee  
Alaska State Capitol  
120 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Support Letter for SB41- Public Schools: Mental Health Education

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Alaska is experiencing a youth mental health crisis with our youth suicide rate being 3.2 times higher than the average U.S. rate during 2016-2018. Then, unfortunately, Alaska had an increase with suicides in 2019 due to adolescent life stressors, mental pain including guilt, hopelessness, angst, fear, and rage.

Substance misuse is one of the most common risk factors of suicide. While life stressors play a role in these mental health (or lack thereof) issues, there is a significant risk increase after intoxication and/or being under the influence. In addition, co-occurring conditions and challenges may exacerbate existing levels of stress like bullying, poverty, and especially traumatic events.

Mental health education can provide a range of helpful strategies to promote overall health, learning positive coping skills and most importantly, reinforcing building positive relationships with trusted adults and like-minded peers.

Again, our youth are in a mental health crisis. This is very alarming with a 43% rate of Alaskan youth having persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness for 2 weeks straight and stopping usual activities, this past year. In addition, a 22% rate of Alaskan youth seriously considered attempting suicide this past year. And a 19% rate of Alaskan youth attempted suicide one or more times during the past year.

It is imperative to provide our youth with mental health education to keep them safe, healthy, and thriving!

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Michael Carson  
V.P. & Recovery Specialist w/ MYHOUSE of Mat-Su  
Chair of the Mat-Su Opioid & Youth Task Force

Sources: State of Alaska Epidemiology, **Bulletin, no.5** & 2023 AK Youth Risk Behavior Survey



January 31, 2025

Alaska State Legislature  
Alaska State Capitol  
120 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Support for Senate Bill 41- Public Schools: Mental Health Education

Dear Senator Gray-Jackson,

Alaska Children's Trust offers our strong support for Senate Bill 41, which would provide guidance to schools around mental health education. As the statewide lead organization focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect, we support policies that promote the health and well-being of Alaska's children and families. Senate Bill 41 does this by supporting schools who choose to include mental wellness as part of their health education curriculum.

Senate Bill 41 allows local communities the choice and opportunity to offer a more complete health curriculum. The mental health pressures facing youth today are numerous, from challenges navigating social media to the lasting impacts of the pandemic. Mental health and wellness are essential components of overall health. Just as youth are taught how to maintain physical health and well-being, they should also have the opportunity to learn how to maintain mental health and well-being. This legislation would support parents, reduce stigma around mental health, and provide children and youth developmentally appropriate knowledge and resources about mental health.

According to KIDS COUNT data, in the last decade the proportion of students feeling sad or hopeless has increased by 59%. Suicide was the leading cause of death for Alaskans aged 15 to 24 in 2019. And in 2023, 21% of high school students reported having planned a suicide attempt in the previous year.

Senate Bill 41 would supply youth with greater opportunity to access the knowledge and resources they need to care for their overall health, including their mental health. Supporting students in this generation is important for strengthening the parents of the next generation and generations to come. Thank you for sponsoring this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

Trevor J. Storrs  
President & CEO  
Alaska Children's Trust

**Alaska Children's Trust**

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