

February 8, 2022

Senate Finance Committee
Alaska State Capitol
120 4th Street
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Support Senate Bill 80 – Youth Mental Health Education

Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

We, the undersigned organizations, extend our collective support for Senate Bill 80, "an act relating to mental health education." Allowing school districts the guidance and opportunity to provide age-appropriate mental health education to Alaska's students will offer additional supports to parents, reduce stigma surrounding mental health, and promote resilience within our children and youth in their darkest moments.

Well before this once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic disrupted their lives, young Alaskans have been crying out for help. Alaska's adolescent suicide rate has long been among the highest in the country, with self-harm deaths among 12-19 year-olds tripling the national average during 2016-2018. In 2019, suicide was the leading cause of death for Alaskans aged 15-24, and 22% of high school students reported having planned a suicide attempt in the previous year. In just over a decade, the rise in suicidal ideation among Alaska teens has been alarming, with planning rates up 33% for male students and nearly 70% for female students. Now, initial 2020 reports are that suicide attempts among 11-to-14-year-olds have increased.

While the full impact of the pandemic on young Alaskans has yet to be fully understood, we know the mental health challenges they face existed long before. Yet despite all of this data, the loss of our young people around the state cannot be measured. We recognize parents are their children's first and most important teachers and know what is best for them. However, some families need the tools, supports, and resources to help ensure their child has every protection in life, even against things we cannot always see.

Mental health is an essential part of overall health, a fact only underscored by this pandemic. Giving local communities the choice to provide a more complete health curriculum, guided by standards established in consultation with local school districts, DHSS, national and state mental health experts, and regional tribal health organizations, is one clear step we can take towards empowering our youth to seek support when they need it.

Youth are raising their voices for help, and it is time we listen. We, the undersigned, urge the swift passage of Senate Bill 80 to better support our young people. Please do not wait another year; the cost is far too great.

Thank you for your consideration and service to our state.

Signed,

