

My name is Sycely Wheelles. I'm a lifelong Alaskan, resident of Anchorage and Junior at Dimond High School and the current Miss Alaska's Outstanding Teen.

Part of my role as Miss Alaska's Outstanding Teen is to advocate for my personal Social Impact Initiative "Mind Matters" which focuses on student mental health advocacy and education. I am writing to share my personal story and why I feel the passage of House Bill 60 is necessary and beneficial to all of Alaska's students.

One in four adolescents ages 12-17 experience a mental illness. I'm part of that statistic.

I have struggled with social anxiety most of my life, but I didn't know that's what I was experiencing until I was diagnosed by a therapist when I was 13.

The first and only lesson on mental health I've ever received was that same year, as part of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade health class. It was a very brief unit, which ironically, I missed most of because I was getting support from my school counselor for my mental health struggles during that time.

I've had 8 years of health classes and I've learned about my digestive system and heart health in every single one of them- but have only been taught about my mental health *once*.

Mental health is a serious public health issue – and the pandemic has only made this more obvious. In 2019, 22% of Alaska high school students planned a suicide attempt in the past 12 months. National reports show that symptoms of depression and anxiety have doubled during the pandemic. In December 2021 the US Surgeon General declared a youth mental health crisis. Included in the recommendations is a need for "recognition that mental health is an essential part of overall health."

HB60 directly address the lack of mental health education in Alaska's schools. This bill would amend existing law (AS § 14.30.360) to include mental health in the health and personal safety curriculum for K-12 students and require that guidelines for developmentally appropriate mental health instruction be developed in consultation with DHSS, regional tribal health organizations, and representatives of national and state mental health organizations. This bill also aims to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illness and increase students' knowledge of mental health, encouraging understanding of the issue.

I, in conjunction with American Foundation for Suicide Prevention- Alaska, National Alliance on Mental Illness- Alaska, and the Alaska Children's Trust, urge the Legislature and Governor to support HB60 - because mental health *is* health.

Sycely Wheelles  
Miss Alaska's Outstanding Teen  
Dimond High Junior