

Hello. My name is Gwyneth Eggleston, and I am a sophomore at Bettie Davis East Anchorage High School, and I am in favor of SB24 - proposing mental health education for students and teachers.

My family moved to Alaska when I was in the 2nd grade. We lived in Kotzebue, a rural community in the Northwest Arctic Borough, where my mom worked as an itinerant therapist. I lived there, off the road system and above the Arctic Circle, for most of my childhood. As amazing as my time living in Kotzebue was, I also witnessed the devastation my friends and community experienced from the lack of access to mental health education in rural Alaska. Now that I live in Anchorage, I can tell you that even with major differences between rural and urban communities, mental health education is severely inadequate for students in both environments.

I have friends that struggle to “fix” or manage their mental wellbeing on their own. They suffer because they don’t have access to effective tools or emotional education. They learn to cope by using unhealthy strategies like isolation, lashing out, using drugs or alcohol, or in some more extreme cases by adopting verbally or physically abusive behavior. The very sad but real truth is that without community support, some students eventually reach the point where they self-harm or even begin to think about ending their life because they can’t see an alternative way to deal with their problems.

For so long too many youths in Alaska have lost their lives to suicide. According to health.Alaska.gov, 90% of people who lose their life to suicide have diagnosable, treatable mental health or substance use disorders.

Too many students do not know how to truly regulate and manage their emotions all on their own. Another reality is that currently, our teachers do not have the time or resources to understand and comprehensively address students’ mental health. For the reasons I have stated previously, I believe this bill is important. It would give students in **EVERY** part of Alaska, rural and urban alike, a chance to learn more about how to appropriately address their mental health.

Specifically, in SB24 it is proposed that we implement health and personal safety education programs which will help students achieve a better, safer, healthier life. School staff will be provided with the opportunity to learn how to understand what their students are going through and how to support them most effectively.

My question for you today is, if this bill is not passed, is there any other bill that can give students and educators in Alaska the education and support for mental that we the really truly need? Because the more we just sit on the issue of youth mental health education the more the problem will grow. This bill is something that can help but we cannot implement this bill without funds and an increase to \$1413 in the BSA would help provide much needed mental health education recourses for all students in Alaska. There is no way we can expect better test scores or academic excellence from our students unless there is some intervention. The truth is, students cannot focus on education if their mental health is suffering.

Thank you for your time.