

From: Nan Llewellyn Voorhees

Email: [REDACTED]

To: Alaska House of Representatives Health & Social Services Committee

Email: House.Health.And.Social.Services@akleg.gov

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Committee Chair Representative Prax and Members of the House Health & Social Services Committee:

Re: This letter is in support of Senate Bill 24, Mental Health Education in Public Schools

I am writing to express my support for Senate Bill 24, which amends the existing health education statute to include mental health curriculum in K-12 classrooms. This legislation is essential to addressing the mental health crisis impacting our youth.

Alaska, like many parts of the country, is facing alarming rates of youth mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and suicide. Factors such as social media use, bullying, academic pressure, pandemic-related hardships, and trauma contribute to the deteriorating mental well-being of our young people. The recent declaration of a **National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health** by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association underscores the urgency of addressing this crisis (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021).

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) reveal that Alaska has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation, with suicide being the leading cause of death among young adults aged 15-24. The percentage of students attempting suicide increased from 12.1% in 2017 to 19.7% in 2019. Providence Alaska is reporting children as young as ten are seeking help after attempting suicide (DeMarban, 2023).

Senate Bill 24 presents an opportunity to address this crisis. I recognize that it will take more than schools to solve the problem of declining mental health amongst Alaska's youth, but schools are in a position to be a big part of the solution. Numerous studies have demonstrated that mental health education in schools leads to improved academic outcomes, better behavior, and healthier development among students (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2024). By providing students with the knowledge, skills, and resources to understand and manage their mental health, we can promote early intervention, reduce stigma, eliminate barriers to access support, and **ultimately save lives**.

It is heartening to note that 13 states already mandate mental health education, and 20 others have incorporated it into their education standards. Many others are considering bills similar to SB 24. By voting yes on SB 24, Alaska can join these states in prioritizing the mental well-being of its youth. Please work together to avoid the pitfalls that befell SB 80, a similar bill that stalled in the House two years ago.

Mental health education is just as important as other types of health education, and students should not be afraid to talk about it. These topics and conversations are important, and it is important that they happen in a healthy way. SB 24 allows for the development of an age-appropriate and effective curriculum.

As a parent, a University of Alaska Anchorage graduate student, and an Alaskan resident, I believe all K-12 students deserve equitable access to mental health education. Please be the advocates our young people need.

Sincerely,

Nan Llewellyn Voorhees

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