

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

March 23, 2023

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senator James Kaufman, Vice Chair
Senator Löki Tobin
Senator Forrest Dunbar
Senator Cathy Giessel

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 24

"An Act relating to mental health education; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 24

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) GRAY-JACKSON

01/18/23	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/23
01/18/23	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/18/23	(S)	EDC, HSS, FIN
02/22/23	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/22/23	(S)	Heard & Held
02/22/23	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/06/23	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/06/23	(S)	Moved SB 24 Out of Committee
03/06/23	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/08/23	(S)	EDC RPT 4DP 1NR
03/08/23	(S)	DP: TOBIN, GRAY-JACKSON, STEVENS, KIEHL
03/08/23	(S)	NR: BJORKMAN
03/23/23	(S)	HSS AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR ELVI GRAY-JACKSON, District G
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 24.

BESSE ODOM, Staff
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for SB 24 on behalf of the sponsor.

ANN RINGSTAD, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Alaska
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 24.

JASON LESSARD, Advocate
Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 24.

ANGELA KIMBALL, Senior Vice President
Advocacy and Public Policy
Inseparable
Alexandria, Virginia

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 24.

IVY MARSHALL, Student
West High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 24.

CHARLOTEE CRUIKSHANK, Student
Dimond High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 24.

LILIANE ULUKIVAIOLA, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 24.

STEVEN PEARCE, Director
Citizens Commission on Human Rights
Seattle, Washington

POSITION STATEMENT: Voiced concerns about SB 24.

PAMELA SAMASH, representing self
Nenana, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns about SB 24.

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Operations Manager
Division of Innovation and Education Excellence
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions related to SB 24.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:48 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVID WILSON called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kaufman, Giessel, Dunbar, and Chair Wilson. Senator Tobin arrived shortly thereafter.

SB 24-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

[3:31:19 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 24 "An Act relating to mental health education; and providing for an effective date."

He stated that this is the first hearing and the intention is to hear the introduction and sectional analysis followed by invited and public testimony.

[3:31:46 PM](#)

SENATOR ELVI GRAY-JACKSON, District G, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 24, introduced the legislation by reading the sponsor statement:

SB 24 amends the existing health education curriculum statute to include mental health curriculum in all K-12 health classrooms to adequately educate students on vital information pertaining to mental health symptoms, resources, and treatment.

The Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) will develop guidelines for instruction in mental health in consultation with numerous stakeholders. Such organizations include, but

are not limited to the National Council for Behavioral Health, Providence Health and Services Alaska, Southcentral Foundation, Anchorage Community Mental Health Services, Inc., North Star Behavioral Health System, and the National Alliance on Mental Health Illness Alaska. The standards will be developed in consultation with counselors, educators, students, administrators, and other mental health organizations to form effective guidelines for school boards, teachers, and students.

After standards have been developed, the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and DEED will be responsible for implementation throughout the Alaska school system. As with existing health education curriculum, the DEED, the Department of Health, and the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault will provide technical assistance to school districts in the development of personal safety curricula. An existing school health education specialist position will assist in coordinating the program statewide.

SB 24 aims to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illnesses and increase students' knowledge of mental health, encouraging conversation around and understanding of the issue.

[3:34:11 PM](#)

BESSE ODOM, Staff, Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, read the sectional analysis for SB 24:

Section 1: The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read Legislative Intent. This section specifies what entities will develop guidelines for instruction in mental health.

Section 2: This section amends AS 14.30.360(a) by removing the word "physical" when referencing instruction for health education and adding "mental health" and "physical health" to the list of curriculum items each district includes in their health education programs.

Section 3: This section amends AS 14.30.360(b) by clarifying that health guidelines developed by the

Board of Education and Early Development must provide standards for instruction in mental health and be developed in consultation with the Department and other entities.

Section 4: The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read Report to the Legislature. This section clarifies that a report must be given to the Senate Secretary and Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives. This report should include a copy of developmentally appropriate instruction and describe the process used to develop such guidelines.

Section 5: The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read Transition. Specifically, the section requires that the state Board of Education and Early Development shall develop the mental health guidelines within two years after the effective day of this Act.

Section 6: This section sets an effective date of July 1, 2023

[3:36:20 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON discerned there were no questions and moved to invited testimony.

[3:36:39 PM](#)

ANN RINGSTAD, Executive Director, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation in support of SB 24. She stated that NAMI was created in 1984 and has affiliates in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and the North Slope. Its mission is to eliminate the stigma of mental illness through advocacy, education, support, and public awareness so all individuals and families that are affected by mental illness are able to build better lives.

She thanked the sponsor for introducing SB 24 which seeks to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness by increasing students' knowledge and encouraging conversations about mental health. She reported that one in six youths ages 6-17 experiences a mental health condition in any given year; half of all mental health conditions begin by age 14; and one in three youths experience mental health challenges by age 18. Education, early recognition and intervention, and prevention are keys to minimizing the prevalence of mental health issues in youths. She

emphasized that these conditions are treatable and the people experiencing mental health challenges need support, compassion, and care. Disseminating accurate information in school will increase the likelihood that children and teens experiencing mental illness will be accepted by their peers. Addressing mental health issues early improves the odds of good outcomes. She opined that strengthening the existing mental health guidelines, in consultation with the stakeholders the sponsor mentioned, will guide school districts to educate students to recognize the warning signs of mental distress and know how to get help. Teachers and counselors are in a frontline position to recognize subtle changes in students' behavior, sometimes more quickly than parents. She said it is now more important than ever to talk openly and provide guidance for everyone who is impacted by mental health issues, but youth in particular. She thanked the committee for considering this important legislation.

SENATOR TOBIN joined the committee.

3:40:55 PM

JASON LESSARD, Youth Mental Health Advocate, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation in support of SB 24. He stated that for the last four years he had been working directly with high school students in the Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS) program. The students learn about various aspects of mental health and how it affects them and their friends. The students also develop their personal stories about their experience with mental illness and share them from a position of power at communitywide storytelling events. After these events, it's common for the storytellers to report that students have approached them in school to ask about how to access help.

He emphasized the data in Ms. Ringstad's testimony: 50 percent of all lifetime mental health conditions onset by age 14; 75 percent of all lifetime mental illnesses onset by age 24 or 25. These profound changes and experiences are occurring largely in the teenage brain and there is little discussion about this scary topic. This can be very daunting for the people experiencing the mental illness and the people who want to provide help, which is why SB 24 and the guidelines it will provide are so important. School districts have brought these programs on in the past with mixed results but they can feel confident that SB 24 has been vetted by professionals in the mental health field. Teachers can also feel confident that the guidelines will help them navigate these conversations and talk

about suicide prevention in a proactive and effective way. He noted that students from the MHATS program would be testifying and their perspective was critical to hear.

[3:44:58 PM](#)

ANGELA KIMBALL, Senior Vice President of Advocacy and Public Policy for Inseparable, Alexandria, Virginia, testified by invitation in support of SB 24. Inseparable is an advocacy organization that is focused on closing the treatment gap, improving crisis response services, and getting help early for youth experiencing mental health conditions. She stated that there is a mental health crisis among youth and Alaska students are struggling. She reported that in 2019, nearly four in ten school students in Alaska reported feeling persistently sad and hopeless, and one in five reported having attempted suicide. She said mental health challenges can affect a youth's education, relationships, and their health and safety, so getting mental health care earlier results in better a outcome. Unfortunately, over half of Alaska's youth with major depression do not receive any treatment.

MS. KIMBALL emphasized that an important first step to support youth in getting help early is to provide mental health education. This increases awareness and understanding of mental health conditions, healthy coping strategies, and effective treatment options. It also reduces stigma and increases help seeking. According to a poll the 4-H organization commissioned, 70 percent of youth said they wish they had learned more about mental health coping mechanisms in school. She said SB 24 will help by ensuring that guidelines for developmentally appropriate mental health education are available to school districts in Alaska. She reiterated support for SB 24 and better lives for youths in Alaska.

[3:47:17 PM](#)

IVY MARSHALL, Senior, West High School, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation in support of SB 24. She stated that she has a personal interest in SB 24 because even before the COVID-19 pandemic, she saw the effects of mental illness on herself and her peers. School is difficult and being a teenager with access to social media can make it even harder. Sometimes students feel hopeless. She said the conversation about mental health came up this year because students were feeling this way but realized they had nobody to turn to. The subject of mental illness is shrouded in stigma and students often are hesitant to reach out to friends and even teachers. But the decision to take a deep dive on the internet for help can yield misinformation

and miseducation. Passing SB 24 will aid in the search for help when students feel lost and it can help prevent serious mental health crises before they happen.

MS. MARSHALL recounted the story of a West High alumna who died by suicide in her sophomore year in college. It shook the school and community into a spiral of "How do we prevent this from happening in the future?" The intended help backlashed and did more harm than good. SB 24 would offer guidelines to schools that want to start the conversation in a safe and health way but don't know where to start.

MS. MARSHALL shared that she is a proud member of MHATS (Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling) whose aim is to destigmatize the conversation surrounding mental health. She has seen the difference this organization has made in her school and peers who attend the Storytelling shows. She opined that passing SB 24 will have a positive effect on communities and kids and potentially help save lives. She urged the committee to listen to her and other youths who support mental health education and a safe school environment for everyone.

3:50:00 PM

CHARLOTTE CRUIKSHANK, Junior, Dimond High School, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that she is a member of MHATS and is testifying in strong support of SB 24. She described the current situation in her school from a mental health perspective. Students are tired and stressed out; their grades are dropping and their attendance is too. They don't know where to turn for information on how to fix what is wrong. She said students are aware of therapy and support groups but there is a stigma attached, so they turn to Google. That takes students down a rabbit hole of information that is often incorrect and unsafe. Passing SB 24 will help change this and help destigmatize the conversations around mental health.

MS. CRUIKSHANK said she wanted to speak today about the effect of suicide from a firsthand perspective. A student in her school died by suicide two years ago. It affected everyone; she saw the effect on teachers, on friends, and on the community as a whole. She emphasized that stopping suicide starts with prevention. She cited the statistic that 50 percent of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, and pointed out that the earlier students receive safe, accurate, and non-stigmatizing information the better. She said passing SB 24 will have a positive impact and could very possibly save young lives. She

urged the committee members to use their position in office to make a change and show that they care.

[3:52:19 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON opened public testimony on SB 24.

[3:52:37 PM](#)

LILIANE ULUKIVAIOLA, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, stated that she has worked with youth across the state and watched them struggle with mental health issues and thoughts of suicide. She supports SB 24 because it would allow mental health education in schools which will give youths the tools to start conversations about mental wellbeing and safe lives.

[3:53:39 PM](#)

STEVEN PEARCE, Director, Citizens Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), Seattle, Washington, stated that CCHR, which is a psychiatric watchdog organization, has concerns about SB 24. He said the bill is supposed to be about mental health education but as written, it will omit valuable data that children should be aware of about the foundation of all psychiatric labels and that they're subjective. He opined that it was the role of the legislature to delineate boundaries to ensure the bill doesn't authorize psychiatric labels and diagnosis and referral.

MR. PEARCE said another point of concern is that psychiatric drugs are known to cause violence and contribute to suicidal thoughts. He maintained that kids have been going through all the challenges and discomforts of adolescence since the beginning of time, but it wasn't until the toxic health care system started drugging them that kids started taking guns to school and initiating mass murder. He said there's a lot of evidence and material linking violence and kids being placed on psychiatric drugs.

MR. PEARCE concluded that CCHR is concerned about these issues and the form that the proposed education will take in schools. CCHR believes the legislature should describe the proposed curriculum in more detail.

[3:57:45 PM](#)

PAMELA SAMASH, representing self, Nenana, Alaska, stated that she supports mental health awareness but as a parent she had three concerns about SB 24. First, she wanted assurance that parents would be involved every step of the way and that there would be nothing sneaky. Second, she was concerned about talking about mental health issues with little kids. Her preference was

to let them be innocent kids. Her third concern was the potential for the bill to provide a door for the Office of Children's Services because "OCS likes to go into the schools and they like to interview kids behind the parents' backs" which can tear families apart. She voiced support for including the foregoing family protections in SB 24.

[4:00:12 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON discerned that nobody else was online or in the room who wished to testify. He listed who was available to answer questions.

[4:00:44 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that he cares deeply about mental health issues but was concerned about placing yet another mandate on schools. He noted that the Anchorage School District (ASD) signed a letter in support of SB 24. He asked the sponsor to speak about how ASD plans to integrate this new curriculum into existing classroom time and resources.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON clarified not SB 24 encourages schools to add mental health education into the curriculum; it is not a mandate. She asked whether he'd reviewed the fiscal note.

[4:01:58 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR replied that he was thinking about local schools and that wouldn't manifest in the fiscal note.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON said 26 agencies, including the Anchorage School District, support the bill. She expressed confidence that she would have been notified if ASD felt the bill was burdensome.

[4:02:55 PM](#)

MS. ODOM added that SB 24 is an encouragement, so schools will have the latitude to assess their capacity to add this to the curriculum. She noted that more than 20 schools across the state have already implemented some form of mental health education.

[4:03:31 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN stated that the Senate Education Committee heard the bill and received resounding support including from students who implored the legislature to pass the bill. She also noted that the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) reported that last year Delaware, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Maryland all passed legislation addressing student mental health and suicide. She was pleased that Alaska

was also moving in that direction. She referenced the public testimony and asked whether anything in the bill authorizes schools to diagnose mental illness in students.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON said no; the bill is about encouraging student education. It doesn't replace physicians and it doesn't diagnose.

[4:04:37 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN asked whether anything in the bill authorizes or encourages involvement from OCS or any other type of organization.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON answered no.

SENATOR KAUFMAN asked whether school districts were in any way prevented from providing this education right now.

[4:05:13 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON replied that SB 24 adds mental health education to the existing statutes that address school curricula.

SENATOR KAUFMAN asked whether schools could add mental health education to their curricula without SB 24.

[4:05:47 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON said she believes that if it's in statute, it will encourage more schools to consider adding mental health education to their curricula.

SENATOR KAUFMAN asked if the fiscal note reflects that developing a curriculum on mental health is outside the scope of the board's normal duties.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON deferred to Ms. Odom.

[4:06:35 PM](#)

MS. ODOM answered yes; the board would need to work with the various agencies and organizations identified in the bill to develop this curriculum.

[4:06:54 PM](#)

SENATOR KAUFMAN directed attention to the language on page 2, line 16 that says, "a school health specialist position shall be established and funded." He restated his question about whether this could be done with the existing resources for developing

curricula. He also asked whether the existing health curricula encompasses some element of mental health.

[4:08:13 PM](#)

MS. ODOM restated that some districts have implemented some form of mental health education, but the material was developed in the Lower 48 and it doesn't recognize Alaska's uniqueness and diversity. SB 24 seeks to develop a standard that can be used throughout the state so it's uniformly effective in a village or urban school.

CHAIR WILSON asked Deborah Riddle whether the school health education specialist position established and funded in the department was an existing or new position.

[4:09:57 PM](#)

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Operations Manager, Division of Innovation and Education Excellence (IEE), Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, stated that it's an existing position that currently is filled. The fiscal note doesn't include that position.

[4:10:21 PM](#)

SENATOR KAUFMAN mentioned the concern that was expressed about ensuring parental involvement, and asked whether the department was receptive to the request.

[4:10:44 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON responded that existing AS 14.03.016 addresses that issue.

[4:11:01 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL voiced support for SB 24 and pointed out that the language about the school health education specialist position was existing statutory language.

SENATOR GIESSEL stated that part of her clinical practice is to provide health care in the Anchorage School District. She also screens for behavioral health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. She said a behavioral health therapist is onsite in many schools but as the sponsor said, none of these services can be provided without the parent's consent. She underscored the importance of these services with data. She said that since the schools reopened after the pandemic, she has provided health care to more than double the usual number of students, many of which are experiencing mental health issues as a result of being isolated during COVID.

SENATOR GIESSEL reported that schools in both Anchorage and Fairbanks are offering mental health education at no cost to the school district. Contract organizations offer the services in schools if the principal agrees and provides an office for the physical exams and the behavioral health clinician. She encouraged the committee members to visit a school that offers these contracted services. She shared some of her professional experiences in this venue to emphasize the need to provide the opportunity for these services. She clarified that this is not about calling in OCS; it's about reaching out to a fellow human being who might need help.

SENATOR GIESSEL disputed the claims that mental health education was a way to manipulate children. She emphasized that kids today are stressed by things that older generations didn't experience. She also pointed out that the agencies that will consult with the state board on developing guidelines for developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health have specialized knowledge in this area.

SENATOR GIESSEL said she was bothered by the size of the fiscal note and wondered whether it could be reduced if some of the nonprofits the sponsor identified could serve as volunteers on an advisory committee to develop the guidelines for the developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health.

[4:16:32 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON responded that she couldn't respond for the 26 organizations that support the bill, but she would have conversations with the ones she'd worked closely with.

CHAIR WILSON asked the sponsor to repeat the parental consent statute she mentioned earlier.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON identified AS 14.03.016 as the statute relating to a parent's right to direct the education of the parent's child.

[4:17:17 PM](#)

At ease.

[4:17:40 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON reconvened the meeting.

[4:17:43 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN referenced the fiscal note and asked Ms. Riddle to explain the reason for the one-time expenditure for 30 committee members to travel twice a year to meet in person. She suggested that meeting virtually could reduce that overhead.

[4:18:35 PM](#)

MS. RIDDLE responded that the fiscal note modeled the standards the department used in the past for other committees. She acknowledged that the meetings could be virtual.

[4:19:56 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN articulated the fiscal benefits for meeting virtually and the equity of access.

[4:20:33 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON observed that the statute relating the parent's right to direct education of the parent's child only talks about notification in subsection (a)(3) and subsection (d)(2)(A) and (B). He questioned whether the statute should be expanded to include notification about other topics that are addressed.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON deferred to Ms. Odom to respond.

MS. ODOM responded that the sponsor was receptive to amending the bill to address the concern.

[4:22:29 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL advised that the age of consent in Alaska is 18, so a parent must give consent for their child to receive any service, even if the child requests the service. She said this is the law even if it isn't in the education statutes.

CHAIR WILSON said he was talking about parents being aware of the topics that might be addressed in the classroom because some topics could trigger unexpected reactions. If the parents were aware, they might be better prepared to deal with the reaction their child might have.

[4:24:04 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON responded by citing the 2022 Mental Health American Report that found a higher prevalence of mental illness and lower access to care among youth in Alaska than 46 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

[4:24:41 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON held SB 24 in committee.

4:25:07 PM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Wilson adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting at 4:25 p.m.