

3/24/21

Senator Michael Dembrow, Chair
Senate Committee on Education

RE: Support Senate Bill 782

Chair Dembrow and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Gabi Cohen. I'm a sophomore at Sunset High School in Portland, Oregon. I'm a member of Students for a Healthy Oregon and I'm here today to ask for your support for Senate Bill 782.

Senate Bill 782 is paramount to equalizing the mental health care that students receive. Many students do not have the money to see a private counselor or therapist, and are therefore suffering in silence. Suicide is the leading cause of death for young Oregonians aged 10-24, with over 125 deaths by suicide in 2018. These statistics are only increasing with each new year, and action is needed right now. Our bill, which includes launching a pilot program to administer mental health screenings in high schools, aims to identify students who need help, which can help to lower youth suicides and increase academic achievement.

When I was in fourth grade, my mom's decade-long, yet hidden struggle with depression came to an end after she unexpectedly took her own life. My brother has dealt with unhealthy substance use related to his anxiety, and several of his teenage peers have tragically committed suicide due to depression caused by the isolation of the ongoing pandemic. I can't help but wonder if my mom or my brother's classmates might still be alive if they received the mental health care that they needed earlier. It is hard to know how many students in Oregon are currently struggling with mental health battles, but our bill aims to identify these students before it can end in self-harm or death. Mental health is a life-long issue, and supporting high schoolers in their teen years can set them up for success throughout the rest of their lives.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to our stories and learn about our bill. I strongly encourage you to pass Senate Bill 782 to save the lives of the Oregon youth and recognize the importance of mental health care across school districts.