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March 24, 2021

The Honorable Michael Dembrow  
Chair, Senate Committee on Education  
Oregon State Capitol  
Salem, Oregon 97301

RE: Senate Bill 782 –Mental health in Oregon high schools

Dear Senator Dembrow and members of the committee:

Providence Health & Services is proud to express our support for Senate Bill 782 and the work of Students for a Health Oregon. As Oregon’s largest provider of behavioral health services, Providence is committed to ensuring that people of all ages have timely access to comprehensive, high-quality care. In addition to our direct service to patients, Providence is working to improve the mental health and well-being of individuals in our communities – especially children – before they require clinical intervention. One of our goals for this work is to encourage teens, and their parents, to overcome the stigma associated with mental health and talk openly about their concerns.

The insights and observations of Oregon high-school students align with Providence’s experience - mental health screening and resources are inadequate to meet the need. The challenge is, this should not be the sole burden of teachers, school districts or the Department of Education. This is a community problem, and as such, it takes all of us coming together in service to our kids and their future.

Senate Bill 782 is a pilot program that simply creates a pathway for school districts to leverage existing mental health resources in their community. Early identification and intervention is critical to saving lives. Through these partnerships, local experts can support staff and teacher training related to suicide awareness and associated risk factors. A screening tool, unique to each schools needs and capacity can then be adopted to identify at-risk students – the key here is support students that have been identified as at-risk by school counseling staff and identify at-risk kids who were previously unknown or not on the ‘radar’ of school administration and staff. Once these students are identified, schools and local mental health providers can work toward solutions that begin to alleviate the burden on teachers, administrators, parents and students.

The pilot established in Senate Bill 782 is an ad-hoc model that has proven effective in communities across the state, but sadly in most cases it has been established after a student has lost their life to suicide. Senate Bill 782 is proactive and gives us an opportunity to understand best practices that can be expanded to serve communities statewide.

As students return to school following the COVID-19 pandemic, Oregon schools will see the impact of increased psychosocial stressors as well as social determinants of health. Providence strongly encourages the legislature to act now and join us in support of Senate Bill 782.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robin Henderson". The signature is stylized with overlapping loops and a clear ending stroke.

Robin Henderson, PsyD  
Chief Executive, Behavioral Health  
Providence Health & Services - Oregon