

March 24, 2020

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 Ethan Sorensen. I am a current senior at Taft High School in Lincoln City, Oregon, and a member of Students for a Healthy Oregon. I am here today to ask for your support for Senate Bill 782.

Over the past decade, the mental health crisis in Oregon has only been escalating. Senate Bill 782 is important because of the need for swift and comprehensive moves in addressing the struggles so many Oregon students endure. With suicide being the leading cause of death among Oregon youth and school staff, teachers, and councilors already overwhelmed with academic-related problems, a screening program such as that provided by Senate Bill 782 would take the burden off of school employees and families and allow students to obtain the support that so often feels out of reach. Senate Bill 782 would not only reduce instances of suicide, self-harm, and other mental health struggles but also destigmatize mental health in schools to where more students can feel comfortable expressing their struggles.

And although statistics and broad statements are powerful, these struggles are personal to many Oregon students who have witnessed this mental health crisis first hand, including me. As someone who has struggled with depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder for much of my life- even turning to self-harm as a coping method- but was only able to obtain help less than six months ago, Senate Bill 782 would help students like me who struggled in silence. Even beyond my own personal struggles, I, unfortunately, witnessed one of the tragic endings that these silent struggles so often lead to. In 2019, one of my classmates sadly took his own life and it was only this event that finally made others aware of his struggles. Screening Oregon students for mental health would help combat the many people like me and my classmates who go through years of enduring this weight without feeling like we can reach out or, in many cases, even realize what is happening.

Especially during the quickly escalating mental health crisis seen during Covid-19, strong progressive legislation is needed to address the lack of resources, support, and help available to Oregon students. I appreciate all of the committee members for listening to both these alarming statistics and personal stories today. Students are struggling with mental health more so than ever and I urge you to support Senate Bill 782 to give students the support they need before this crisis only worsens and more Oregon students have to endure year-long struggles that so often lead to the hundreds of Oregon teens who die from suicide each year.