

March 17, 2023

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Education

From: Judy Strand, CEO, Metropolitan Family Service

RE: Support SB 549 School Health Crisis Response Act

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Weber, and members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of Metropolitan Family Service (MFS), a nonprofit community-based organization that has been active in the Portland Metropolitan areas since 1950. We want to convey our support for SB 549, the School Health Crisis Response Act in order to increase support for youth experiencing mental health needs. This bill strategically connects partners to work in collaboration in an effort that is critical at this time. We believe that passage of this act will be a tremendous support for youth who are facing serious mental health concerns at this time.

MFS partners with 18,000 people each year, in an effort to help people get past the barriers of poverty, inequity and social isolation. One of our primary objectives is to *help youth succeed*, and to do so within an intergenerational context; strength based, and interwoven within our larger community. We have long standing partnerships with six school districts, and work with 20 different schools with youth from preschool age through high school. Our efforts focus in low resourced neighborhoods, where families are living on an average income of \$31,800. Seventy percent of our program participants identify as BIPOC and 35% of our program participants speak a language other than English at home.

While we have seen youth in schools benefit from our programs (community schools, early childhood programs, intergenerational mentoring) and the efforts from dedicated school staff, we also see a growing need to attend to social-emotional and mental health needs that are currently neglected due to lack of accessible expertise and services in this area. Parents and students are facing serious stressors related to economic concerns in particular, with increased fears and anxiety about meeting their basic needs. The resulting spiral of anxiety and depression is leading to high risk situations for the youth in our communities.

One participant comes to mind in particular, a young 2nd grader who was participating in our programs who lived in an unsafe home environment, and was recommended to come to our programs as a means to provide a safe space and a chance for more socialization. The student had a very hard time participating, and for many weeks only felt safe while sitting under the table. The student was always sad and typically rolled into a ball while not wanting to engage in the activities. It took almost an entire quarter of the school year of school and MFS Staff working with this student, for this student to feel safe enough to step out from the table and meaningfully engage. This is one child among many who need expert support in order to find a healthy way forward in their lives in the midst of distress and fear.



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Moving Lives Forward.

[www.metfamily.org](http://www.metfamily.org)

In summary, mental health support and trauma-informed practices are needed for the many children facing challenges who need help to feel safe and be able to participate in their school and personal lives effectively.

Now is the time to intervene so that the students and families of Oregon can thrive. We respectfully urge you to pass SB 549 in order to lead the way in this very critical moment.

Thank you for your service to Oregon, and for taking the time to hear our concern. Please let me know if you have questions or wish to discuss this issue further. I can be reached at [judys@mfs.email](mailto:judys@mfs.email).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Judy Strand' in a cursive script.

Judy Strand, CEO  
Metropolitan Family Service