



Mental Health Education in Schools *Legislative Issue Brief – 2015*

Mental health is critical to overall physical health and healthy living, and should be included as an integral part of health education in schools. Our public education system in New York has long recognized the value of health education. In more recent times we have updated this statutory imperative to include education in alcohol, drugs, tobacco abuse and the prevention and detection of certain cancers. The time has come to include mental health education as well.

Mental health issues impact each of us daily either personally or through the experiences of family members, loved ones, or friends. Most recent statistics indicate that one in five adults and children have a mental health diagnosis. In New York, over 300,000 of our youth are living with a serious mental health condition that significantly impairs their daily functioning. Still our education laws show little if any recognition of the need to teach our youth about this critical aspect of overall health.

Failing to talk about mental health or to provide basic public mental health instruction has consequences. More than fifty-percent of students labeled with emotional or behavioral disorders drop out of high school and, of those who do remain in school, only 42% graduate with a high school diploma. High school graduates go to war having never been taught about PTSD. Other youth have parents returning from war; some with serious health and mental health needs. Many will require mental health treatment.

Lack of knowledge coupled with stigma deters many people from taking full advantage of today's treatment options in a timely manner. In fact, it often takes decades from the first onset of mental illness symptoms for people to seek help and 4 out of every 5 young people affected in the U.S. do not receive treatment. This is very serious and disturbing since untreated mental illness tends only to become more severe over time and, in extreme cases, too often ends in suicide completion or self-injury. Over 90% of youth who die by suicide completion were suffering from depression or another diagnosable and treatable mental illness at the time of their death. We do young people a disservice by remaining silent about mental health conditions like depression, eating disorders, and PTSD.

Unfortunately, there is little teaching or discussion of mental health in most public school health classes in New York. We believe that New York lawmakers hold the key that is needed for this to change. Without legislative intervention and a clear policy direction from lawmakers on this issue, there is little hope of breaking the silence. This is because the subject of mental illness is still an

...working to ensure available and accessible mental health services to all New Yorkers

uncomfortable subject to discuss for many in our society. Teachers can be equally uncomfortable or uncertain as to the boundaries around what they can and cannot teach. This leads to a “when in doubt leave it out” mentality and causes confusion about the schools proper role in teaching such subjects. MHANYS supports amendments to the law that will help clarify the schools role and will free teachers to instruct on the subject with the full imprimatur of the State.

MHANYS seeks legislation that would allow maximum flexibility in the way each school or school district addresses the change in the statute. Our objective is to clarify that mental health is as integral to one’s overall well-being as is physical health, and as such, should be reflected in the law guiding health instruction.

By ensuring that young people are educated about mental health, we increase the likelihood that they will be able to more effectively recognize signs in themselves and others, including family members, and get the right help. Further, as we begin to teach the facts about mental health and openly discuss the issues from a health perspective, we will begin to lessen the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. Young people and their families would feel more comfortable seeking help, academic performance for all students would be enhanced, and ultimately lives can be saved. As New York works to restructure and integrate systems of health and mental health care, shouldn’t we also be preparing our citizens of tomorrow to think differently about the role that mental health plays in their lives?

Mental health, as we understand it in 2015, is an integral part of our overall health and can no longer be ignored in New York’s public education law. If we ignore it, then we fail to adequately prepare consumers of the future to be informed and active participants in the very systems we are building today.

Recommendation: Support S.6046(Marcellino)/A.3887-A(Nolan), which relates to clarifying that health education includes mental health as part of the school health curriculum.