



Mental Health Education in Schools *Legislative Issue Brief – 2016*

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. 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. Over 60% of young adults with a mental illness were unable to complete high school. Young people aged 16 to 24 with mental illness are 4 times less likely to be involved in gainful activities like employment, college or trade school, and are three times more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system. It is therefore critical to begin teaching young people about mental health early in life since about half of all chronic mental health conditions begin by age 14, half of all lifetime cases of anxiety disorders begin at age 11, and 22% of youth aged 13-18 experience a serious mental disorders in a given year.

Lack of knowledge coupled with stigma deters many people from taking full advantage of today's treatment options in a timely manner. In fact, almost 2 out of every 3 adults that need mental health services do not receive them and 50% of those that do delay getting treatment for an average of 10 years. 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. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 12 high school students have attempted suicide. 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,

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

there is little hope of breaking the silence. This is because the subject of mental illness is still an 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 2016, 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. We possess the knowledge and tools necessary to increase awareness in young people about mental health, how to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and others and how to get help. Why in the world would we withhold this lifesaving information from our youth?

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.