

Public Testimony

S.B. 1 AN ACT EQUALIZING COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Good Day Senator, Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Anwar, Senator Kushner, Representative Gilchrest, Senator Hwang, Senator Somers, and Honorable Members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Ariel Belek , I am writing to you as Ariel Belek, Family nurse Practitioner at Newtown Middle School, School based health center(operated by the Connecticut Institute For Communities, Inc. Greater Danbury Community Health Center, a Federally Qualified Health Center).

I appreciate the opportunity to present written testimony on *SBI An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral ad Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic*. As a nurse practitioner working at the school-based health center we have seen an increase in kids stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. There has also been a subsequent decrease in academic performance among many of these students. I work closely with my mental health colleague, a licensed clinical social worker to identify students who are in need of mental health treatment. All students who visit the school-based health center for any reason are screened for possible risk factors of mental health issues utilizing the rapid adolescent prevention screening. The ability to have students screened and seen quickly by a mental health professional has been invaluable during this time. If this service was not available, students would have to be placed on a waiting list to be seen or sent to the emergency departments. This ensures that students are assessed quickly, and treatment is started immediately.

In addition, families are having increased stress and financial burdens during this time. Students who may have had insurance prior to the pandemic now may be uninsured or have gaps in insurance coverage due to parents being out of work. Several parents have also expressed that it is more difficult now than in the past to get appointments with their pediatricians. Parents may be forced to utilize emergency rooms or urgent care centers if they did not have access to our clinic. School-based health center ensures that all these students have access to care and do not fall behind on vaccinations. It also helps decrease the burden on urgent care and emergency departments. This year we had to be creative to provide care to our students. We were successful at creating a drive-up flu vaccine clinic and vaccinating more students that we have in the past years.

Moreover, we have implemented several programs working with the school district to ensue students are able to remain in the classroom as much as possible during this time. We offer rapid covid-19 testing and PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing. Providing testing in this easily accessible and free format has helped quickly identify positive cases and isolate them to decrease spread. This has also fostered a closer relationship between the school-based health center and the school nurses.

In addition, parents I speak with are so grateful to have access to our school-based health center. It has helped decrease some of the burdens for them this year. When students are ill, they receive a prompt appointment and treatment. Many parents are extremely burdened and taking their child to the pediatrician when they are ill is just one more burden to place upon them during this time.

School based medicine is my passion. I truly hope that these programs can be expanded to more schools to ensure all families and students have access to the types of programs we provide. This is one thing our state can provide to support all families during this difficult time. Thank you for taking the time to hear me on this issue.

Thank you,
Ariel Belek, Family Nurse Practitioner-BC