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Testimony for Assembly Standing Committee on Education School Health, Mental Health and Physical Education in New York State

Thank you, Chairwoman Nolan and members of the Assembly Education Committee, for the opportunity to address the very important topic of school, mental and physical health. Your timely focus on this issue is very welcomed and it is especially important to link school, mental and physical health as a three-pronged dynamic. This testimony is submitted by the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS) which represents over 7,300 building level administrators.

Hearing the Alarm

Building principals have reported the mental health needs of students as their #1 concern and priority for quite some time. A ten-year study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals found that 74% of principals rated the mental health needs of students as their highest concern, and for good reason;

- A 2016 study by the Child Mind Institute found that mental health disorders are the most common health issues facing youth today.
- Nationally, 60% of high school students with mental health needs fail to graduate from high school. On average, one in every five youth, ages 12-17, has a mental health diagnosis.

Our work at SAANYS confirms this research. At various forums throughout the state, the unmet mental health needs of students have been clearly articulated as a statewide crisis.

Responding to the Alarm

During the 2017-2018 school year, the School Administrators Association of New York State dramatically accelerated its focus and activities on the increasing mental health needs of students. Here are just a few of the initiatives undertaken by SAANYS:

- SAANYS collaborated with the New York State School Board Association (NYSSBA) on two statewide student mental health conferences in Latham and Long Island.
- A three part student mental health series was held in March and April in the Greece Central School District for over 200 educators in the region.
- Three SAANYS summer workshops entitled “Promising Practices to Support Student Mental Health” were held in Long Island, the Capital Region, and Rochester and each was very well attended.
- SAANYS’ magazine, *Vanguard*, focused one issue solely on Student Mental Health, and included peer-reviewed articles on the challenges school face and best practices to address the mental health needs of students. We were honored to have Commissioner Elia as a special guest columnist in this issue and it was disseminated to over 8,000 educators.

- Our annual SAANYS conference, held just two weeks ago, included eight presentations on strategies for addressing the mental health needs of students. This conference was attended by over 400 administrators.
- SAANYS participated with the Mental Health Association of New York State (MHANYS) on a joint lobbying day for increased awareness on the issue.
- SAANYS was part of a panel discussion with other major state association representatives at the MHANYS annual conference just this past week and we, in turn, have had MHANYS at many of our regional meetings.
- SAANYS provided a leadership role in developing a briefing for the NYS Educational Conference Board on mental health, laying the initial groundwork for advocacy.
- SAANYS Summer 2019 workshops on Trauma Informed Schools are being planned to take place in several locations around the state.

Although I am proud to boast about the work of SAANYS, this is not a commercial break, but rather a statement on the profound sense of urgency on the part of building administrators on this very serious issue, as well as the high level of commitment on the part of SAANYS to provide the highest quality professional learning for our members. All of the foregoing was put on at the expense of SAANYS without financial assistance.

Internalizing the Urgency

During this first phase of shining the spotlight on the issue, much emphasis has been placed on information dissemination and there is a good reason for this. We know that education on such issues is important as a social determinate and that focusing fact-based information can be an incentive for opening dialogue and assessing base-level needs. Highlighting the association between education and mental, and physical health began the formation of partnerships which have developed at both the state and local school district level (Rasberry, et al. 2017).

Taking Roots

And this work is beginning to take root. The purpose of this hearing is to more fully understand the status of the field. I would like to explore just a few initiatives that have grown out of focused attention on the mental health needs of students and schools.

Early Needs Assessments

Many school districts are beginning to obtain baseline data on the mental health needs of their students. Strategies include targeted teacher focus groups that provide quasi-case studies on students so that all are aware of individual needs. Other districts have implemented the use of ACES (adverse childhood experiences) screening for all students and others use EWS (early warning signs) checklists for identification of critical indicators of trauma.

Professional Development and School Culture Shifts

Not surprisingly, a study by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) found that childhood trauma significantly impacts not only socio-emotional health, but physical health as well. Many districts have shifted to a trauma-informed school approach with extensive professional development. When schools emphasize and understand the impact of trauma on students, a school response becomes more comprehensive and preventive, rather than an exercise of crisis management. Other districts have also systemically integrated Positive Behavioral and Interventions Support (PBIS) programs and restorative justice practices. The Rochester and Schenectady City School Districts are two examples of districts that have provided intensive professional development on resilience and restorative practices.

Embedding Collaboration

As highlighted in the *Vanguard* magazine, the Berne Knox Westerlo School District, Syracuse City School District, Ballston Spa School District and Cohoes City School district are four examples of districts seeking ways to collaborate and maximize limited resources. Each of these districts have reached out to county and community providers to establish satellite mental health supports in schools. These efforts have improved communication between mental health and education professionals and allowed for more efficient delivery of interventions. In other districts such as Syracuse, 29 of 32 buildings have in-house mental health services in place, provided by community agencies. We need to scale up this type of service across the state.

But So Much More is Needed

Promote positive early childhood development

Promoting early identification of mental health needs and access to quality services is essential (US Surgeon General report, 2014). It is imperative to refocus early education as a primary strategy for addressing issues of equitable services. Early childhood is especially poised to address the early mental health needs of children, as the socio-emotional domain is a pillar of high quality early childhood education programs. However, full day kindergarten and prekindergarten are not required grade levels and this impacts healthy schools. The chronic absenteeism rate for students with mental health needs is higher than their peers, however, it is difficult for districts to address early chronic absenteeism. We have tied educator's hands by not fully realizing prekindergarten and kindergarten as integral pieces of a P-12 educational system, where required interventions could begin years earlier.

Facilitate social connectedness and community engagement

Recent studies have shown a decline in student engagement in physical activities and social engagement in schools. Based on data published in Aspen's annual "State of Play" youth sports report, the crisis facing American youth sports deepened in 2017. Volunteer coaches usually have little experience in coaching and the cost of organized sports is high. Almost 45 percent of children ages 6 to 12 played a team sport regularly in 2008, as compared to 37 percent now. The top reason kids want to play sports, the report indicates, is a desire to be with friends, not winning. Students need connections and schools that work toward positive school cultures understand the importance of providing access for all students to extra-curricular activities, outside of the academic program.

Increase community collaboration between mental health agencies and school districts

Certainly, across the state, we have seen an increase in the number of collaborations between schools and mental health providers. We share the same population of youth who would benefit from access to integrated services. However, we are only at the beginning of systemically addressing this complex social issue. Our state faces many difficult choices in terms of where to spread limited resources. Supporting interventions that embed mental health programs and services within or in collaboration with school districts is a very sound investment.

In summary

As the gaps in equity continue to widen, we as a state must stand firm in our commitment to supports for vulnerable youth and families. The institutional barriers that our policies have created must be recrafted and scrutinized in the face of the overwhelming information regarding the impact of poverty and trauma on students.

Over the following months, many of us will be developing and negotiating fiscal priorities. It is the hope of building level administrators that fiscal supports to institute best practices to meet the rising tides of mental health needs of students will be a high priority. We cannot state strongly enough that additional resources must come on the heels of additional mandates. Our members need financial support to put in place promising and known best practices, as opposed to additional mandates.

Your work and commitment to these issues, Assemblywoman Nolan shine a light on the path forward and we thank you for this opportunity to address our serious concerns for the students in our schools.