



SCHUBERT CENTER
FOR CHILD STUDIES

**Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee on SB 246
March 13, 2018**

Thank you Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Skindell and Senate Finance Committee members.

My name is Gabriella Celeste and I offer this testimony to you today as Policy Director of the Schubert Center at Case Western Reserve University and an interested party in legislative matters concerning student supports and school discipline, specifically Senate Bill 246 – the SAFE Act. Our Center encourages developmentally appropriate policies, such as the SAFE Act's approach to promoting student success in part by building positive behavior supports and limiting disciplinary school removal of pre-kindergarten (pre-k) through 3rd grade students.

The Problem

In Ohio, we suspend thousands of our youngest students from school every year and we do so, as a matter of discipline, without addressing the underlying causes of student behavior. According to 2015-2016 discipline data reported to the Department of Education, there were over 36,000 out of school suspensions of students just in pre-k through 3rd grade; nearly half of these were for “disruptive/disobedient” behavior. “Discipline”, which means to teach or train, by simply removing children from school does nothing to teach children how to manage their own emotions and behaviors or to build healthy relationships.

Why it Matters

Positive social connection is essential to our children's healthy development and educational success. In particular, school connectedness matters and this begins with trusting relationships. When students feel cared for and have a sense of belonging to their school community, they become less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as substance use, violence, or sexual activity at an early age.¹ Conversely, removing a student from the school environment and socially isolating them, can be extremely harmful to their healthy development and positive social engagement.² A 2015 study of primary and secondary school children found children who were socially isolated experienced greater mental health difficulties.³ A Council of State Governments study found students with even just one disciplinary contact were five times more likely to drop out of school compared to those without any disciplinary contact.⁴ In short, excluding children from school not only doesn't help, but can inadvertently contribute to even more negative outcomes.

¹ McNeely, C.A., Nonnemaker, J.M., Blum, R.W. “Promoting Student Connectedness to School: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.” *Journal of School Health*, Vol. 72 (4), 2002. Accessed at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12029810>

² See e.g., Valtorta, N.K., Kanaan, M., Gilbody, S., Ronzi, S., Hanratty, B. “Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke.” *Heart Online First*, published April 18, 2016 as 10.1136/heartjnl-2015-308790. Accessed at <http://heart.bmj.com/content/early/2016/03/15/heartjnl-2015-308790.full.pdf+html>; Hall-Lande, J.A., Eisenberg, M.E., Christenson, S.L., Neumark-Sztainer, D. “Social Isolation, Psychological Health, and Protective Factors in Adolescence.” *Adolescence*, Vol. 42, No. 166, 2007. Accessed at <https://facweb.northseattle.ed246/Gu/lchaffee/PSY100/Journal%20Articles/Hall-Lande%20et%20al%202007.pdf>

³ Matthews, T., Danese, A., Wertz, J. Ambler, A., et al. “Social Isolation and Mental Health at Primary and Secondary School Entry: A Longitudinal Cohort Study” *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (March 2015) 54(3): 225–232. Retrieved at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4733108/>

⁴ Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, *Breaking Schools Rules*, Council on State Governments Justice Center and Public Policy Research Institute (July 2011). Available at: https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

The SAFE Act Approach

Positive behavior interventions and supports that promote social emotional learning (SEL) and relationship building skills not only help students succeed academically, as research has shown, but also help to promote a positive learning environment – this enhances school safety for everyone.⁵ The aptly named SAFE Act strives to ensure our youngest students are connected to school and building SEL skills like understanding emotions, self-regulating behaviors, showing empathy, making responsible decisions and peacefully resolving conflicts. As such, the SAFE Act not only aligns with best practices, but with the state SEL standards for pre-K through third grade that Ohio adopted several years ago.

Instead of removing and isolating children, the SAFE Act seeks to better equip teachers with the tools for building a positive school climate and culture with effective classroom behavior management and social and emotional development in our students. The funding appropriation in the bill – while perhaps not enough to meet full demand – conveys an important recognition of the need for resources to support these vital skill-building efforts. The data reporting provisions in the SAFE Act are also important for ensuring progress in meeting the intent of the bill. By allowing school districts ample time to phase in the requirements over several years, however, districts are not unduly burdened with meeting an unrealistic timeline.

In many ways, the SAFE Act does not go far enough to ensure that disciplinary removals from school would only be an option of last resort for our youngest students. Importantly, there are several exceptions for serious acts like bringing a firearm or knife to school. But the exceptions go further, for instance including removal of a student for causing “serious harm to property” or, even more broadly, where a student’s suspension or expulsion is “necessary to protect the immediate health and safety of the student, the student’s fellow classmates, or the classroom staff and teachers.” This exception leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Additionally, pre-k to 3rd graders, like all students, can be removed from school immediately, for the remainder of a school day, for a variety of behavior including where they pose “an ongoing threat of disrupting the academic process,” again, something that can be quite broadly applied.

In other words, the SAFE Act is in no way a total prohibition of school removal for pre-k to 3rd graders – nor does it address the overuse of school removal for students in 4th through 12th grade – but it does offer a sensible start.

It is no exaggeration to say that Ohio’s future economy and prosperity depends on the success of our students today. School-based efforts, through a positive behavior interventions and supports framework, offer the most promising behavior management and prudent fiscal strategies for keeping students safely in school, reducing social isolation and increasing the likelihood of healthy student engagement and academic achievement. The SAFE Act recognizes that keeping students positively engaged in, connected to and successful in their education begins with keeping them in schools, committed to their achievement.

Thank you for your consideration and leadership on these important matters.

⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics, Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion Policy Statement, Council on School Health. Pediatrics (March 2013) Vol. 131, Issue 3 Retrieved at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/3/e1000>