



SB 246 Proponent Testimony
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Before the Senate Finance Committee

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Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chairwoman Manning, Ranking Member Skindell and members of the Senate Finance Committee, my name is Kristopher West and I am the Clinical Coordinator of the Early Childhood Mental Health Program in the Big Lots Behavioral Health Department at Nationwide Children's Hospital. I am here today to testify in support of SB 246, sponsored by Senators Lehner and Manning, which would prohibit certain suspensions and expulsions of students in grades pre-kindergarten through three.

The Early Childhood Mental Health program (ECMH) at Nationwide Children's Hospital provides behavioral health treatment for families with children age's birth through Kindergarten. Through this program and supported by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, we run the Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership hotline for the State of Ohio as well as provide Early Childhood Mental Health Classroom Consultation and training throughout a 16-county region in Central Ohio.

Early childhood mental health is the social, emotional and behavioral well-being of children (birth through five years) and their families and includes the capacity to experience, regulate and express emotion; form close, secure relationships; and explore the environment and learn. The emotional well-being of our children is directly tied to the functioning of their caregivers and families with which they live.

Early childhood mental health has multiple influences, many of which are critical in early education and preschool classrooms. This social and emotional development is the foundation for school readiness.

Imagine if you would a situation where an adult in a young child's life decides that child is too "bad," too "disruptive" to be in school and as a result is suspended or expelled. Unfortunately this situation is far too common and research shows us that those students are up to 10 times more likely to have lower reading scores, fail academically, be held back, harbor negative school attitudes, drop out of high school or even find themselves caught up in the judicial system.



Now take this same situation and apply it under SB 246 – it looks completely different. Rather than leave teachers with the option for suspension or expulsion like we have today, this bill ensures teachers receive the proper training, supports and strategies they need to address these complex, difficult students while creating a positive school environment where all children feel safe, nurtured and valued. By pushing our education system to think and react to these problems differently, SB 246 helps keep more kids in the classroom.

A recent study in California found that the impact of suspensions on successful graduation rates leads to a lifetime loss of \$2.7 billion (just from that one graduating class in California). In addition, researchers estimated that if they could increase graduation rates by just one (1%) percent, \$180 million of those economic losses would be averted.

Additionally, research done by Dr. Walter Gilliam at the Yale Child Study Center demonstrated that teachers who show depressive symptoms and/or high levels of stress were significantly linked to higher expulsion rates. In a randomized control trial, Dr. Gilliam demonstrated that incorporating early childhood mental health classroom consultations in response to these more difficult and complex students, significantly reduced oppositional and disruptive behaviors and the number of expulsions.

In 2015, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services recognized the need in our state and increased funding for early childhood mental health consultation in preschool/Pre-K classrooms statewide; tripling the number of credentialed consultants and adding the Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership hotline as a “safety net” for schools and teachers to gain quick access to highly qualified early childhood mental health counselors. Since that time, the hotline has fielded over 2,000 calls annually with 93% of these calls resulting in the child being able to stay in the classroom. In addition, Nationwide Children’s Hospital provides weekly, intensive consultations to over 50 sites and 120 teachers as well as brief consultation for over 400 classrooms. Our master trainers provide additional training to early childhood teachers, reaching 1,500 professional in 2017.

Ohio uses the evidence-informed Georgetown Model of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation for its programming. Studies of this model have shown the following outcomes across the nation:¹

For the Child:

- Improved social-emotional competence
- Reduced challenging behavior

¹ Brennan, et al., 2008; Hepburn, Perry, Shivers and Gilliam, 2013; Perry, et al., 2010; SAMHSA, 2014



For the Teacher:

- Improved teacher-child relationship
- Decreased stress
- Improved classroom climate
- Increased teaching skills with regard to social-emotional topics

At School:

- Reduced rates of suspension and expulsion
- Decreased teacher turnover
- Improved staff interactions

For the Family:

- Improved parent-child relationship
- Fewer missed work days for parents

You have heard in previous testimony about the rates of suspensions and expulsions in Ohio, the impact of trauma and ACEs on brain development and the social-emotional development of young learners. Gaps in opportunities for social and emotional development, challenging home and community environments and other social determinants of health lead to increased risks for future academic, social, and vocational struggles, an increased likelihood of incarceration as well as costly mental and physical health conditions and treatments.

SB 246 is as much about making sure we help all children in their social and emotional development as it is about giving educators the skills and strategies they need to build resiliency and confidence so they can focus their efforts on teaching our children to be curious and learn. Children should not be removed from the opportunity to learn these skills and SB 246 looks to bridge that gap.

Once again, Chairman Oelslager and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on Senate Bill 246. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.