

April 21, 2024

Chair Pavliga, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Brewer and members of the House Behavioral Health Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written proponent testimony for House Bill 352. My name is Beth Bracale. I am a retired public school teacher and was a foster parent for three years. I am proud to support HB 352, and am impressed that Representatives Baker and Carruthers are working together to address this issue which impacts all citizens.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are not new, but they are far more prevalent in recent years. While ACEs cross all cultures and classes, they are particularly rampant in high-poverty regions. Multi-generational poverty and multi-generational ACEs go hand in hand. When not addressed, childhood trauma creates lasting, often crippling consequences, impacting the growth and functionality of both children and adults. Without intervention, the consequences are passed down from generation to generation. Since Ohio has one of the highest ACE rates in the country, it is in the state's best interest to create a study commission to make recommendations to the General Assembly for both the prevention of ACEs and healing of trauma-induced behaviors and illnesses already being experienced.

My mother was one of five children who suffered abuse and neglect. She and her youngest brother were adopted by caring, nurturing families who did their best to help heal the results of childhood trauma and guide Mom and Uncle Bob to become their best selves, contributing to their communities in numerous ways over their lifetimes. Sadly, my mother's other three brothers spent their childhoods in and out of orphanages and foster homes, ejected out of the system upon reaching the age of 18 and expected to be functional adults with little guidance or support. They became angry, abusive adults with numerous health issues, both physical and mental. They had no positive role models for raising a family, so their children experienced further traumas, as did their children, and the cycle continues.

Even with the advantages my mother received from a positive adoption experience, she carried mental and emotional scars. While she compensated the best she could, she still passed down some of the residual effects of the traumas she had experienced. Because such things weren't spoken of publicly during that time, she was unable to ask for help. Unless one realizes there is a problem, it can't be addressed, and help isn't forthcoming if the need isn't obvious. Education and counseling are invaluable in helping victims of ACEs to heal and prosper. Our communities would benefit by assisting their citizens to become their best selves, in turn able to contribute to improving the communities in their own unique ways.

Like my mother, one of my granddaughters was taken away from her mother and placed in a group home. My husband and I were given custody of her during her last three years of high school. She had been abused physically, mentally, and emotionally, which had led to her making choices to protect herself that put her in the juvenile justice system. We did the best we could to get her help and give her guidance, but she had been misdiagnosed by the system based on her mother's testimony. My granddaughter was uncooperative because she did not feel heard or valued by either the justice system nor the mental health care system. She is now twenty-one and has a daughter of her own. She is still improving, and trying her best to be a good mother, and yet the cycle continues.

As a public school teacher in both the inner city of Cleveland and the high-poverty city of Ashtabula, I have worked with hundreds of students who suffered ACEs. This often affected their ability to focus and learn. The Ashtabula Area City Schools system, for example, has an alarming rate of students in special education, and ACEs are a factor in this trend. I reviewed the data for reading ability over time, pre-k through 12th grade, as I had been working with a large number of high school students who only read at

the first or second grade level. I wanted to discover when the disconnect began. It became obvious that many students entered kindergarten well behind the norm, some not having attended pre-k, and just never caught up. Children whose parents talk with them, play with them, and read to them enter school with a vocabulary of thousands of words. Neglected children often have much smaller vocabularies, and their ability to learn is limited by this.

Prevention of ACEs begins with teaching people how to parent, and teaching children the skills needed to be successful, thriving adults. The learning process should be enjoyable and encouraging, not punitive. In addition, people working in the healthcare, legal, and education systems need to be trained to recognize the difference between common childhood behaviors and injuries and those that are more likely to be signs of neglect or abuse. Resources for healing and support should be easily accessible in every community – some successful models have even created centers within the schools themselves. And these resources should be advertised as prevalently and persuasively as the latest must-have games and clothing trends. Positive role models are needed throughout the community, demonstrating how to interact with others with empathy and respect.

A community is a manifestation of its citizens. People who are able to live up to their potential and contribute the best of their talents and abilities to their neighborhoods help their communities to thrive. Our state is made up of communities, of neighborhoods, of people. When we not only protect our children, but nurture them, we are investing in the productive future of the State of Ohio. My hope is that the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study Commission to be created by HB 352 will inspire the General Assembly by its recommendation to set systems in place to do just that.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of HB 352. If you have any questions feel free to contact me at 440-463-3163 or via email at bethbracale@gwcmail.net.

Sincerely,

Beth E. Bracale
Conneaut, Ohio