

Jessica Benson

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HB 172 – 136th

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani and honorable Members of the House Health Committee, thank you for allowing me to offer testimony on HB 172. I'm unable to be present in person due to a health appointment but I appreciate that you are taking the time to read my testimony.

I am a mother and a substitute teacher. I've worked with children and families for over thirteen years. I highly regard parents' rights but my concern comes from the potential risk to the most vulnerable of Ohio's children presented by this bill. Section 5122.04 of Ohio's code allows for very minimal treatment – lasting no longer than 30 days or 6 sessions – for children to seek help for themselves. The section only makes this exception for children 14-17 years old – we are talking about teenagers, not grade schoolers.

When I was 14, I was in high school in WV, where – to my knowledge – an exception like this did not exist. I began acting out and someone encouraged my mother to seek therapy for me. It took several sessions before I was even comfortable enough with my provider to *begin* to open about what was going on in my life. She had concerns about my homelife but nothing I had shared to that point warranted any type of call to CPS or the police. The provider reached out to my mom, with my permission, and expressed interest in us having a family session because of her concerns. My mom immediately canceled my therapy sessions, told the therapist I was a liar, and I received no additional mental health support until my twenties. Not every parent is willing or equipped to make the best decisions for their children. Sometimes, the fourteen-year-old child has a better grasp on what is healthy, what is RIGHT, and what **they** need than their parent has the mental capacity to understand. Parents should always have the first chance to provide a stable and safe environment for their children that is representative of their culture and values --- and children should not be limited from seeking that safety themselves if a parent cannot or chooses not to fulfill those responsibilities.

Let me bring in another example from a Columbus suburb in the past few years. A teenager gets in trouble in their junior high. Mom is called to the school to deal with the troublesome student. Through the discussion with the mother and teenager, information is revealed that leads administration to call law enforcement to respond to the school and invite the father of the household in to discuss a "serious criminal offense allegation". An allegation so serious, in fact, that the man pulls out a pistol and shoots himself in the front office of the school to avoid answering for it.

Now imagine if instead, the teenager knew the very rights you're considering eliminating today. What if, instead she understood she could talk to the licensed mental health provider at her school – her counselor or school social worker? Could hundreds of our children, educators, and school support staff be living **without** the trauma associated with an active shooter event at their school/work? What if it took her several sessions before she felt comfortable enough to start talking about the things happening in her home? What if a licensed mental health provider did what ALL mental health providers are encouraged to do and helped the teen pull

her mom or another safe adult into the conversation? I'm sure a mental health provider would have been better equipped to support the girl in a way that didn't risk harm to entire body of students and staff. Wouldn't she have been better protected if we were instead promoting Section 5122.04 instead of trying to remove it?

You see, I stood outside that building and watched teenagers flee the cafeteria for what they perceived was their life after that gunshot. I have texts still on my phone from my own child who was crouched under a desk as her teacher locked down the classroom. One of your fellow representatives' own child was in that building that day. You know what protected most of those children from long-lasting mental distress after the incident? What created the resilience our kids developed afterwards that led my own child to tell me she sometimes forgets it happened at all? Well, **that** was the mental health support. Mental health support that was open & accessible to any student at the school who needed it in the weeks that followed.

Abuse, neglect, trauma, and crisis are very REAL harms that are happening in Ohio. There are still kids in Ohio whose parents ARE the perpetrators of harm. And it's our job as citizens and legislators not to do further harm to them. It takes willingness to listen to the experiences of others, professional and personal, with open minds and hearts, to truly weigh the harm or benefit this bill may bring. The **best** thing we can do for our children is to prevent them from experiencing traumatic events. I cannot agree more with the proponents that parents have intimate knowledge of their children that SHOULD make them the best advocates. But that's not every parent. The **least** we can do is refuse to stand in the way of teenagers seeking relief when the unimaginable occurs. I urge you to vote **no** on House Bill 172. Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony. I am available for questions at JLBENSON822@gmail.com or (515)-708-1088.