



Chairman Blessing, Vice Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Robinson and all members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide supporting testimony on House Bill 123. My name is Annie Stephens. I am the Ohio School Outreach Coordinator for Sandy Hook Promise. I want to talk to you today about the impact SHP has had on Ohio schools and students.

I have been with SHP since 2015 and my role is to assist and guide Ohio school districts that implement our no cost Know the Signs programs. SHP has programming in school districts in almost every county in Ohio and I'm proud to say we have trained over 1 million students and adults in Ohio alone, over 6 million across the country.

While I am an advocate of and believer in the SHP model and programs, this bill does not prescribe that districts use us to meet the requirements of this legislation. We certainly hope that many will, but we also understand that all might not. While there are other groups and organizations that provide meaningful training that could meet the parameters of this legislation, I will be focusing my remarks today on the scope and impact of Sandy Hook Promise.

Oftentimes after a tragedy, somebody comes forward to say that they knew or saw indications of trouble ahead. However, they didn't know what to do with that information. Sandy Hook Promise's Know the Signs programs educate and empower students and the adults who work with them to recognize warning signs of someone in crisis, so they can get the help they need before a tragedy happens.

It starts with community and community starts with a simple hello. Everyone can take part in creating a safer school atmosphere, by fostering a sense of connectedness and looking out for one another. Our Start With Hello program empowers students to be the ones to intentionally reach out and connect with their lonely, or withdrawing peers and have a meaningful interaction. Something as simple as sitting next to someone sitting alone in the lunchroom or asking how their day is going, can make a big difference to someone experiencing the hardships of extreme loneliness and social isolation. By building a school community that looks out for one another, social isolation is reduced and warning signs are identified faster.

Building on the foundation that Start With Hello fosters, our Say Something program empowers middle and high school students to tell a trusted adult when they notice warning signs and signals of threatening behavior, with a heavy emphasis on social media. Since students are the eyes and ears of the school now more than ever, we need to equip them with tools to recognize threats, act immediately and say something to a trusted adult who can take then action. Students who Say Something know the difference between getting someone the help they need and being "a stitch" and they take the brave step of coming forward because that's what you do as a part of your community.



We also know that suicide and suicidal ideation are an all too pervasive problem for Ohio students. Suicide is preventable, when we know the signs and it is critical to train not only teachers, but students, in suicide prevention. This legislation will ensure that teachers and students are annually receiving life-saving, evidence-based training on suicide awareness and prevention, like Signs of Suicide, which we provide. The program explains how to identify the signs and signals of depression, suicide, and self-injury and encourages students to Say Something to a trusted adult should they notice those signs in themselves or others.

We understand that not every student feels comfortable having a conversation with an adult about a threat or warning sign they came across. Sadly, not every child has a trusted adult. Keeping this in mind, this legislation would create a statewide anonymous reporting system. SHP's reporting system, the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System, has a user friendly application, that allows students to utilize their medium; where kids communicate in their style and can share screen shots to make a tip. All tips are immediately triaged by SHP's trained crisis management center team and sent back to school district personnel and law enforcement (as appropriate) and as designated by the school district before the program is launched. Our Anonymous Reporting System fits hand in glove with the Say Something program so students not only have the tool but know how and when to use it.

For lasting impact, schools embed the messages of Start With Hello, Say Something and Signs of Suicide in a new or existing club. This provides sustainability, immediate relevance, and gives students an opportunity to use their unique youth voice as a constructive and effective response to what's happening around them. In Ohio alone there are over one hundred SAVE Promise Clubs, like the Start With Hello club at the North Ridgeville Academic Center, who are doing amazing things every day to make their school safer and more inclusive!

When students report a threat of any kind, be it to an anonymous reporting system or to their trusted adult, it's critical that the adult receiving it knows how to respond and that there is a threat assessment team in place to approach it in a balanced and measured way. We help school districts assemble threat assessment teams that are comprised of a healthy mix of administrators, school safety personnel, and mental health professionals. We then train these teams in our Safety Assessment & Intervention program which was designed by Dr. Dewey Cornell from the University of Virginia. During this training, teams look for existing gaps in their current safety policy and code of conduct. Teams learn how to quickly determine the seriousness of any threat and develop an individualized plan to get to the root cause of the threatening behavior which will get that student back on the right track, while also keeping the rest of the school community safe. This program helps reduce response time should a school's safety plan be needed, and it helps prevent tragedies way upstream- preventing violence before it happens. Recently, the Ohio Department of Education received a federal STOP Act grant to bring this program to districts across the state.



As the keeper of our Ohio story I'm here to say with confidence that we know that these programs work. Schools that implement our programs experience an immediate impact in school climate and in reporting especially. Early on, when I'd hear about an intervention that was made in the days or sometimes hours after a training at a school, I'd remark about the timeliness of the program. HOW LUCKY we were to empower that student to come forward and save the day. After seeing these incidents happen time and time again, I've come to realize it's not luck or timing. Plain and simple, the schools that haven't implemented prevention programs like ours yet and haven't experienced a tragedy of some kind are the lucky ones. In Ohio and across the country, school shootings and suicides have been averted as well as other threats of violence and victimization. Recently, the counselor at an Ohio intermediate school reached out to me to tell me that on the day after their Say Something training a student came forward about a potential threat- that their friend had brought a knife to school and that the counselor herself was the intended target. There was obvious relief in her voice but also pride that, when tested, her students stepped up and made a big difference.

It's been my pleasure to work with school counselors, superintendents, school resource officers, student leaders, school nurses, parents, school boards members, law enforcement and community leaders who have been on the leading edge and understand the value of prevention while also reinforcing brick and mortar supports. Champions who understand that our programs don't only avert school shootings, the nexus of our story, but help the little boy who might have been cyberbullied over spring break had their friend not said something, or the teenager who might not have recognized subtle changes and warning signs in her friend who was cutting and found her help. Prevention is hard work but it's life changing and lifesaving work!

As an Ohioan I'm proud of our communities who are leading the way in this space. As a mom, I recognize the need for evidence-based practices to support and empower our kids when it comes to behavioral health and violence prevention; and as the Ohio School Outreach Coordinator for Sandy Hook Promise, I'm very glad to be here today.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I appreciate your time and attention today and would be happy to answer any questions.