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Primary & Secondary Education Committee

Dear Committee Members:

I am sending this letter to show my strong support of HB492. As a college lacrosse coach, for 19 years I have had the privilege to mentor hundreds of student-athletes. Over the years there has been a seismic shift in our profession regarding what our student-athletes need from us and what our priorities should be. In the last decade, I cannot think of a single year in which at least one, more often several of my players are dealing with active mental health crises. Earlier on in my coaching career, I lacked a basic understanding in what these young men were struggling with and how their struggles were unique and therefore the assistance they required was also unique.

In 2019, I was rocked when a former player of mine, just one year removed from his playing days, committed suicide. He was a kind soul and a great person to be around. He also struggled deeply with depression. As a coach I have always tried to be compassionate and understanding when one of my players was struggling. I would like to think I have been helpful and been a positive influence in their lives. What I have come to realize is that there are times when I can and should offer more. When a person is truly in crisis, to be able to offer more than just compassion can make an enormous difference. Knowing who to call or how to act can save lives.

Through the tragedy of losing a former player, I developed deeper relationships with his parents, our school counselor, and those on campus in student affairs who are tasked with dealing with mental health emergencies. I am grateful that through this tragedy I have become better equipped to help my players who are struggling. I also know that I have much more to learn.

A basic course in mental health is logical and should be a necessary part of any coach's certification. While the current bill wouldn't place those requirements onto college athletics, our coach's body took steps to hold ourselves to the same standard. The Ohio Athletic Conference lacrosse coaches unanimously agreed to complete bi-annual mental health training. There was no pushback on cost or the time commitment as it was both affordable and not unnecessarily time consuming.

As coaches, we challenge ourselves and our teams to always get better. Putting in time and effort will have a positive impact in anything we do. We are willing to do this as our success depends on it. When it comes to the safety of our players, it should be compulsory. There should be a special connection between a player and his coach that can last a lifetime. To ask a coach to spend time to make sure he is equipped to help his student-athletes in a time of crisis is a responsibility that comes with the title, not a burden.

Regards,

Colin Hartnett