



State Representative Marlene Anielski
Ohio House District 6

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the House Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony today on an important piece of legislation for Ohio's youth. House Bill 502 is a modification to House Bill 543 which passed in the 129th GA and became law in 2013. The current law is officially entitled the "Jason Flatt Act – in honor of Joseph Anielski," which requires each public K-12th grade school board to incorporate youth suicide awareness and prevention training into the existing in-service training requirements for a person who is employed by any school district or educational service center to work in a school as a nurse, teacher, counselor, school psychologist or administrator and any other personnel that the board determines appropriate.

I would like to give some background on the Jason Flatt Act. Clark Flatt, Jason's father, founded The Jason Foundation, Inc. (JFI) to help bring public awareness to the "Silent Epidemic" and to help provide information, tools and resources for students, educators, youth workers and parents in suicide prevention and awareness. The Jason Foundation offers its curriculum **FREE** to the state and school districts to allow no fiscal impact to either the state or school districts.

In the 129th GA in developing and passing the legislation, I sought input from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), the Ohio School Board Association (OSBA), school superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, Ohio Suicide Prevention, Jason Flatt Foundation, Ohio School Counselors Association (OSCA) and other behavioral health organizations. During the process, it was brought to my attention that there are several not-for-profit groups that offer awareness and prevention training curriculum **FREE** of charge for the education community already. Under the Jason Flatt Act, all of these programs, like Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation, LifeAct and many other organizations are viable options for the schools or enables the school districts to develop their own programs. It is important that during these difficult fiscal times, we do not create unfunded mandates or mandate additional hours of training for our schools and personnel. It was my goal to provide flexibility to the school boards to implement the training programs and choose the programs that best fits their needs. It is important to note that the bill works within the parameters of the current Continuing Education Units (CEUs) and does not add any additional hours to the preexisting requirements.

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Sadly, as I call it “The Youth Silent Epidemic” is one of the leading causes of death in our children. Suicide is an important public health issue involving psychological, biological, and societal factors and is preventable with treatable behavioral health care. After a period of nearly consistent decline in suicide rates in the United States from 1986 through 1999, suicide rates have increased almost steadily from 1999 through 2017. In Ohio, it is one of the leading cause of deaths in children ages 10-14, and the 2nd leading cause of death in youth ages 12-18. More than twice as many people die by suicide in Ohio than homicides. What do we hear most about, HOMICIDES. We must do something to help our children who are suffering in silence. We need to show a meaningful expression of care to children. Empowering our dedicated professionals working with our youth to recognize the signs and symptoms of students that may be at-risk is an important step in stopping the epidemic. Education and awareness can help reduce the stigma often associated with depression and mental health issues. It will encourage our youth to seek help and discuss their feelings before it is too late. It also reduces the stigma for families that have experienced the loss of a loved one.

At your seat, I have placed personalized handouts about suicides in your district. I have also emailed the handouts to each of your offices.

House Bill 502 makes one change and one change only in the existing Jason Flatt Act. In lines 53 to 55 of HB 502, the change is that the school personnel shall take the suicide prevention and awareness training annually instead of every five years.

The Ohio data that you have received and current trends indicate that all aged suicides have increased from 1,420 in 2010 and in 2017 the number of suicides were 1,650. The Ohio figures are higher than the national average. Plus, these numbers are understated because of the stigma. Therefore, as a state, we are losing every single day, 365 days a year, nearly 5 people that die by suicide or one person dies every 5 hours.

Chair and members of the committee, thank you for your time and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have this afternoon on House Bill 502, designed for in service training for public school educators about youth suicide awareness and prevention.