

Ohio House of Representatives
Education and Career Readiness Committee
Krista Hussar, Career-Technical Director
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HB502 (Anielski) Youth Suicide Prevention Training
March 20, 2018

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 testimony today on an important piece of legislation for students in Ohio. I am Krista Hussar, Career-Technical Director for South Stark Career Academy, a four-school career-technical education compact in Stark County. As a career-tech compact, we provide career-technical education within our public school districts for students from all four districts. Additionally, I have dedicated years in public education as a licensed school counselor, middle school teacher, and I have a graduate degree in mental health counseling. Today, I am here to speak on behalf of my districts in the South Stark Career Academy, which includes Canton Local, Perry Local, Osnaburg Local, and Sandy Valley Local, as well as the rest of our excellent school districts in Stark County.

House Bill 502 is a modification to House Bill 543 which passed in the 129th General Assembly 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-12 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.

This has been an especially challenging and emotionally-heavy year for Stark County students, staff, and communities. Stark County school districts have lost 16 middle and high school students since the 2017-18 school year began; 11 of those losses since January 1, 2018. Teen suicides have accounted for 13 losses of life. In addition, there have been 171 teen suicide attempts documented by Stark County law enforcement agencies, which does not include any attempts not reported by families. Each tragedy has had its own unique circumstances, but all are alike in this way: everyone wishes we could have prevented them. We all are paying closer attention to our students in an effort to recognize signs of stress, anxiety, depression, anger, despair, and more. We are even more concerned when we recognize apathy. Staff members are seeking additional information about suicide awareness and prevention, and I don't just mean teachers, counselors and administrators. Our coaches, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, secretaries, classroom assistants, and other employees have relationships with students, and every person wants to help prevent future tragedies. Furthermore, students and parents are looking to school personnel to teach them what we know so they are informed and empowered to help prevent teen suicides.

While Stark County's districts have been particularly affected this year, the risk of teen suicide is certainly not isolated to our area or even our state. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the SECOND leading cause of death for ages 10-24. (2016 CDC WISQARS) Each day in our nation, there are an average of over 3,470 attempts by young people grades 9-12. If these percentages are additionally applied to grades 7 & 8, the numbers would be higher. Further, it is reported that four out of five students who attempt suicide have given clear warnings.

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. This bill continues to give local school boards flexibility to implement the training programs and choose the programs that best fits their needs. Suicide awareness and prevention training is crucial for empowering the dedicated professionals working with our youth to recognize the signs and symptoms of students that may be at-risk. Education and awareness can also help reduce the stigma often associated with depression and mental health issues, both for students and their families. 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.

I, Krista Hussar, and the districts of Stark County support HB 502 and the proposed requirement for annual suicide prevention and awareness

training for school personnel. It is an essential part of supporting the social and emotional health of our students to the very best of our ability while we educate and prepare them for successful adulthood.