

## **Dalton SB 374**

Dear Committee Members–

I write to you today to urge you to approach S.B. 374 with a great deal of caution and deliberation. I live in Branford, and I am an assistant principal at a high school in a different town. We were all greatly affected by the tragedy at Sandy Hook; none more so than persons in my profession. As an assistant principal, my specific responsibilities include school security and student safety. Therefore, any bill that tends to protect and support children is one that will have my undivided attention.

The intent of this bill is entirely positive. However, I urge you to look at the practicality and magnitude of what is being proposed. Last year, I ordered a behavioral risk assessment on one of my students after several red flags convinced me that he was psychologically and emotionally unstable. That assessment took a mental health professional no less than four hours to complete, and more than a week passed before we had the completed report.

S.B. 374 proposes doing this for nearly every child in the state. The truth of the matter is, the current mental health system is entirely incapable of assessing that many patients in a meaningful way, within a reasonable timeframe. If the argument is that the proposed assessment will be far less comprehensive than the one I detailed above and therefore several could be done in the course of a day, then I question the value and usefulness of the assessment itself. In the case above, a significant risk was in fact detected, and we were able to get the child the help that he needed before a serious problem emerged. However, a less comprehensive exam would not have revealed the extent of the problem, and would therefore be of little use. In fact, it might even add to the problem in giving a false sense of security to parents which could lead to questions of legal liabilities should a problem later emerge. In other words, if the bill calls for some superficial assessment in the interest of saving time, then it will be of limited use, perhaps even counterproductive, and the bill would be nothing but a smokescreen intended to placate voters. If the bill calls for a comprehensive behavioral assessment, then it is entirely impractical.

In addition, I strongly oppose tasking school personnel with the responsibility of organizing, scheduling, or in any way conducting these assessments. I oppose this due to the fact that next year, the Department of Education is requiring all schools in the state to shift to a comprehensive teacher evaluation system known as SEED. This requirement calls for multiple observations of every teacher in the school, coupled with several conferences to take place periodically throughout the school year. In total, I will be required to either observe or conference with every teacher in my school nine times. This is a small school; we have roughly 60 teachers. Therefore, the principal and I will ultimately conduct 540 meetings or observations. Now imagine for a moment the task ahead of districts such as New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport. If the Committee argues that school social workers and psychologists are not burdened by SEED and therefore are free to conduct these assessments, they will be unable perform the regular duties for which they were employed in the first place, and that is to work with students who are emotionally at risk, which is the very thing this bill purports to address. This is to say nothing of the countless PPT and 504 meetings which carry specific time frame requirements under federal and state law. If the final version of S.B. 374 requires schools to administer these assessments, it

will amount to a paradoxical Sisyphean task that essentially guarantees that S.B. 374 assessments would confound efforts put forth by the Department of Education to improve teaching and learning and to provide emotional support for at-risk youth.

If S.B. 374 is adopted, school districts simply do not have the resources to administer it. If the state requires parents to pay for behavioral assessments either through an insurance policy or out of pocket, and outside of school hours, the measure will be subject to widespread attack as an unconstitutional invasion of privacy, and will cost those representatives who vote for the measure a good deal of political support. Again, there are thousands of families in this state who simply do not have access to mental health services and who would require state support to comply with the law. The final question for your committee to consider is the reality of our mental health system's capacity to test nearly every student in the state in a timely manner. In my opinion, this would stretch resources to such an extent that the assessments would be conducted haphazardly and thus, the reports would be of little value in enhancing the safety of our children.

An alternative approach would be to focus on training and professional development for staff and for parents in monitoring the emotional well-being of children, along with state financial support for assessment and intervention. All school districts have partnerships with parents through organizations such as PTOs. In addition, many school districts have adult education programs in the evenings. A program could be developed between those organizations and offered to parents on a voluntary basis that focus on the emotional/psychological care of children. None of us wants a child to fall through the cracks of our system. However, the Committee must take a wide view of the magnitude of S.B. 374 and the likelihood of such a measure achieving the intent of the law in a meaningful way.

Respectfully submitted,  
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Branford