

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Gerratana, and Representative Dillon:

My name is Aymi Bennhoff and I am the Nurse Practitioner at the Pawcatuck Middle School Based Health Center as well as Norwich Free Academy. I am submitting this testimony on HB 6824 in opposition to the budget and the cuts it contains to the School Based Health Centers.

I believe school based health centers to be a critical and non-negotiable part of health care. While primary care providers may do a good job diagnosing and treating acute and chronic illnesses, there is a huge gap that busy clinics are unable to bridge: that between mental health and physical health.

I work with middle and high school adolescents and am continually surprised by how much stress these children encounter. An example is the 15yo girl with chronic heartburn I saw a few years ago. She was sent to me by the school nurse for this issue; however, after getting to know her better a story emerged of her grief over her mother's death several years ago, her stressful home environment, her poor diet, and her feelings of worthlessness, isolation and depression. A mental health screen showed she was positive for depression/anxiety and we were able to get her in to see the mental health clinician at school based health. I worked with her on her diet, sleep patterns, and overall lifestyle to address the heartburn. Fast forward to today, when I saw her a month ago I discovered that she now sleeps well, has healthy friendships in her life, is heartburn-free, and plans to attend college next year. She no longer scores positive for depression. I cannot explain the joy I feel when I see a child turn his/her life around for the better. Had a school based health center not been available for this child, I am not sure that would have been the case. Despite my best intentions, if I worked in a primary care office I never would have had the opportunity to get to know her to the extent that I did, and that allowed her real underlying issues to surface. It is unlikely that the passage of time alone would have healed her wounds.

I think of the tragic events that took place at Sandy Hook School years ago. Had the troubled young man had a school based health center at his school would it have made a difference? Would he have received the counseling and/or medication he obviously so desperately needed? It's difficult to know for sure, but I do know that each child who becomes healthier and is cared about makes a difference and contributes to a safer society for us all.

It's not always easy to quantify the effects of various interventions, especially in the short term. As a society we tend to look for quick fixes and to see rather myopically. I believe that as a part of a community we have a responsibility to others; to help when we can, and to give in ways that help those who need it the most. I think everyone would agree that our children deserve this. And given the time and access constraints of primary care, school based health centers are a perfect solution to fill the gap that currently exists.