

Dear Legislative Committee,

I have been a public school teacher and coach in West Hartford, Ct for nearly 40 years. My role at Hall High School for 37 years has been coordinator and English teacher for a program that serves capable, but under achieving students. Our mission is to help these students get control of their academic lives by helping them overcome whatever obstacles may be impeding their progress. The program (ASK) offers an academic curriculum in the form of English and social studies classes, mentoring from the team of two teachers and a half time social worker and more intensive counseling from the social worker. The program has had excellent results both in the short term with drop-out prevention and in the longer term with enhanced future opportunities from our graduates. Many of these students (45-50 per year) are considered "at risk" and without the opportunity to receive the support of this program, would likely flounder--at best--and, perhaps, pose some greater threat to themselves or to our community.

We are fortunate that West Hartford has supported a program like this (and others) because the town recognizes the importance of providing social work, counseling and other services for students at risk. The more complex the lives of our adolescents have become, the greater the need for services to help with this population. The statistics for mental health needs among this age group are astounding (about 20% have bouts of serious mental health issues). To insure safer communities, it must be a priority to increase our services to this population. The recent tragedy clearly illustrates that! The irony is that it is difficult to measure the success of programs like ours when our clientele do NOT make negative headlines, but that is what makes these services so essential.

Enclosed, please find a letter from a recent graduate that illustrates why a program like ours works so well (several other responses are available upon request). My intent is not to promote our program, but to validate the need to support mental health services in the public schools for the well being of our students, local communities, state and nation.

Sincerely,  
James Solomon  
Hall High School  
West Hartford, CT