

Testimony in support of BOOST bill S2452

Submitted by Eric Gurna, Interim Executive Director of the Providence After School Alliance (PASA)

The US is in the midst of an ongoing youth mental health crisis, and Rhode Island is no exception. According to Blue Cross/Blue Shield, over 25% of children aged 3–17 in our state are facing mental, emotional, or behavioral health issues. Access to care is limited, with roughly 60% of families struggling to obtain needed treatment. Close to 40% of Rhode Island high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped doing usual activities.

Roughly 10,000 Rhode Island adolescents experience serious thoughts of suicide each year. Nearly 10% of Rhode Island high school students reported attempting suicide one or more times, with higher rates among young people of color, and LGBTQ+ youth.

We know that a significant driver of this crisis is isolation and lack of social connection. That is exactly why afterschool and summer programs are an ideal way to invest in the mental and emotional wellness of our youth. These programs are safe spaces where young people connect with near-peer staff who they trust and respect. The out of school time workforce, while talented, dedicated and full of heart, are not mental health professionals and we often find ourselves out of our depth when trying to support youth experiencing mental health challenges.

However, there are proven, evidence based trainings and other supports such as Mental Health First Aid that can be provided to program staff that increase mental health literacy, give staff higher confidence in intervening, reduced stigma, and make improved, faster connections to professional help. These trainings are already being provided to the staff of afterschool programs in Massachusetts through an initiative called "Enhancing Mental Health Capacity for Youth-Serving Organizations," and Rhode Island desperately needs the same support.

Investing in the existing infrastructure of afterschool programs, and the existing afterschool program workforce is an efficient and effective strategy for increasing the mental and emotional support our young people deserve.