

January 30, 2018

Chairman Mel Myler
House Education Committee
107 N. State Street
Concord, NH 03301

Dear Chairman Myler and Committee Members,

My name is Kenneth Norton and I am the Executive Director of NAMI NH the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I have several family members with mental illness and co-occurring addiction. As a parent and former licensed foster parent, I have had personal experience with school discipline and special education services. On behalf of NAMI NH, I am here today to testify in support of HB 677.

It is well documented that school suspensions and/or expulsions are more often directed at students who have Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED) and other mental health conditions which may include early childhood adverse experiences and/or trauma. Additionally, there is an increasing body of research indicating that further isolating and ostracizing these students via out of school suspensions may do more harm than good and contributes to decreased academic performance and increased dropout rates. Schools districts across the country are rethinking the use of suspension and expulsion and exploring alternatives to these practices including looking more broadly at the overall school climate.

As a member of Governor Sununu's School Safety Task Force, I can personally attest to the amount of time which was spent by the task force discussing the important role that improving the overall school culture can have on improving academic outcomes and school safety for all students. The *New Hampshire School Safety Preparedness Task Force Report* issued in June 2018 includes a section on "Alternatives to School Suspension and Expulsion." Two of the report recommendations from that section include:

- *Recommendation 4: Improve school culture by expanding social and emotional learning programs in schools at all levels statewide.*
- *Recommendation 9: Expand programs that focus on creating a positive school climate and atmosphere with structured support for students, such as the Multi-Tiered System for Support and Behavioral Health (MTSS-B) or Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS).*

The *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety* convened by President Trump and released on December 18, 2018 draws similar findings and conclusions. The report notes that some states have reduced suspensions and expulsions by as much as 50% by utilizing programs

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to address the overall school climate and culture. They give several examples of social and emotional school curriculum programs including noting New Hampshire and other states use of *Comprehensive school-based mental health systems*. This includes the Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Behavioral Health and Wellness also known as MTSS-B which this bill provides funding for to expand the number of schools in New Hampshire implementing this evidenced based, comprehensive program.

New Hampshire's new 10-Year Mental Health Plan released last week also makes contains an entire section on the need for all schools to have Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Behavioral Health and Wellness. In conclusion, this bill is putting into practice important policy objectives to improve academic outcomes and school safety recommended by recent reports at the state and federal level, as well as first-hand experience of New Hampshire school districts. On behalf of NAMI NH, I urge you to vote HB 677 as ought to pass.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I will do my best to answer any questions which you might have.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenneth Norton", written in a cursive style.

Kenneth Norton LICSW
Executive Director