

SB 2311

Senator Joan Heckaman

Chairman and Members of the Committee: I am Senator Joan Heckaman from District 23. I am here to introduce you to SB 2311. This bill would state that schools will include instruction in mental health awareness and suicide prevention, including instruction and information on identifying warning signs and risk factors, identifying at-risk peers, and the availability of resources. Schools can collaborate with other districts and share resources. Instruction can be delivered through distance education or virtual learning.

Last session we became acquainted with Kennedy Gjovik, a young lady from my legislative district. She made it her mission to ensure that students have access to instruction in mental health awareness and suicide prevention. She provided compelling testimony on the importance of this training when she testified in the Senate and House Education Committees.

She may be with us virtually today to add additional information and tell her story to you. But I will begin the story.

Kennedy was not able to find anyone to listen to her in her high school, suffered an extremely traumatic event in school, and as a result had to go many miles to get help. She eventually transferred to another school.

She came to Bismarck last session and testified in both the Senate and House. In the end, the bill passed, but with only the stipulation that each school in the state identifying a behavior health resource coordinator. This individual connects with students to hear their concerns, assess local/regional resources for help, and help students access identified resources.

That part of the bill was successful and continues to positively impact our schools in the following manner. I am leading a group of educators in identifying resources schools may use to address educator stressors, as well as parent and student stressors. Those resources are now being distributed to schools through the connection with the behavior health resource coordinators. We thank Kennedy for her concerns and getting this positive piece of legislation passed.

SB 2311 will only add to the opportunities for educators and the behavior health resource coordinators to positively impact lives of our young people by including these same identified items. The part that adds traction to this year's bill is that schools may collaborate with other districts, both public and nonpublic, to share resources and provide instruction through distance or virtual learning. I believe this opens the doors to a variety of possibilities.

I want to walk back to the paragraph where I identified the importance of those school behavior health resource coordinators. Pam Sagness from DHS and Luke Schafer from the Central Regional Education Association have led the educators stress workgroup into an outstanding compilation of resources that are now available online to educators. But I believe that these resources and others should be directly taught to students in grades 7-12. An assumption that if the resources are out there, students will access them, seems a little thin. I would want schools to actively engage with students to present these materials.

I have attached a couple of documents from the Youth Behavior Risk Survey (2019). This survey provides information to schools on what needs are identified in local schools, whether that is trending up/down, and helps direct interventions/instruction.

You will note that on the high school survey, from 2007-2019, the percentage of students who felt sad or hopeless increased, the percentage of students who seriously considered attempting suicide increased, the percentage of students who made a plan about how they would attempt suicide increased, and the percentage of students who attempted suicide increased. These results are alarming. We need to do something. Attached is a link to that survey. [Youth Risk Behavior Survey | North Dakota Department of Public Instruction \(nd.gov\)](#).

As you hear testimony on this bill, I would ask you consider how impactful this bill can be to helping students across the state.

Thank you for your time this morning and I would stand for any questions.