

To: Chairperson Baumgardner and members of the Senate Committee on Education

From: Vicki Claassen, MSN, APRN, BC, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Board Certified in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Nursing. APRN at Family Service and Guidance Center, Topeka, KS

I am here today as an opponent of SB 333. I oppose the parts of SB 333 that eliminate training for all school staff. I oppose the changes to the Jason Flatt Act that would attempt to identify select staff based on the, "extent of such staff member's interaction with students." I also oppose the removal of the minimum one hour of training annually.

Suicide rates are increasing at alarming rates among teenagers. And suicide does not discriminate based on age, gender, race, upbringing or social economic lines. According to the CDC it is estimated that each day in our nation over 3470 suicide attempts are made by young people in grades 9-12. These numbers would be even higher if applied to 7th and 8th graders as well. And sadly, we are now too frequently hearing of even pre-teens ending their lives. The CDC reports approximately 1700 teenagers die by suicide each year making it now the second leading cause of death in their age group.

As a psychiatric nurse practitioner in a community mental health center I work with kids ages 4 to 18 on a daily basis. In addition, I live with and am attempting to raise 2 teenage boys. What I can tell you today and I tell my patients frequently, along with my own kids, is that you couldn't pay me enough money to go back to high school. Times have changed – sure, some changes have been great and our kids in many ways have advantages we couldn't even imagine. But not all of the changes have been positive. Pressures that our kids are facing today are so much different than even 10 or 15 years ago, not to mention 25 years ago like some of us in this room. What happened at school stayed at school, and there wasn't photo evidence typically of everything we did, everywhere we went. We were able to leave school and escape from whatever was going on at school until the following day or week. Now with social media, cyberbullying and the constant contact generation that they are they can't escape.

But bullying isn't the only pressure kids today are experiencing. The academic pressures – how many AP classes have they taken? What is their weighted GPA? How many college credits can they complete before graduating? And how many activities are they participating in? I recently reviewed an article about pressures on high school kids and it cited that these students, playing sports and taking a heavy course load often "work" a 14+ hour work day, just with the time spent in class, at practice and doing homework. And this doesn't account for those community service projects, honors clubs and part time jobs we often encourage

these kids to do as well. No wonder our youth are overwhelmed and often left feeling depressed and anxious.

But here's the deal – even the kids that aren't taking high level courses and participating in sports and other extracurricular activities.... these kids are still spending more time at school than anywhere else 5 days a week, 9 months a year. I don't know about any of the other parents of teens here, but I average seeing my own kids about 2-3 hours a day, most days. Sad, but true. You know who does see them? Their teachers, coaches and other school personnel. That's why the Jason Flatt Act is so important. Teachers can be our first line of defense. They see these kids and interact with these kids and know these kids well. They can help us help them. Suicide awareness means potentially saving lives. But we can't pick and choose who we train, who we prepare, and who we educate. You see, it may be the lunch lady that has given Joe an extra helping on the days they are serving his favorite lunch, but also knows he won't ever eat the green beans. Or it might be the custodian who is always cleaning up the bleachers at the end of basketball practice and stops and chats with Suzy about how her jump shot has improved. It may be one of these individuals that notices a warning sign that something isn't right. Or it may be one of them that these students are most comfortable talking to when they are struggling. It is imperative that we make sure all school personnel have the training to be prepared to recognize warning signs and know how to best intervene or seek help for the student. We can no more predict which school staff is going to be sought out by the student needing a listening ear than we can predict the weather in Kansas. Therefore, we need to make sure that everyone that the students come into contact with in the school setting is educated and prepared. The difference that one hour of training annually can potentially have is immeasurable. And the benefits can extend beyond the school day and school setting. These same individuals who are members of churches, communities, organizations and families can use this training to potentially save a life in these settings as well.

Suicide rates among our youth are not decreasing. If anything, we should be here today talking about increasing suicide prevention, awareness and trainings. Sadly, many of our youth seem to be almost desensitized to the death of their peers by suicide. Perhaps they are still surprised at times by who it is, but not that it is happening. The reality is that teens lack the maturity and coping skills to deal with life's stressors. And that's why the Jason Flatt Act is so very important. As originally proposed and signed into law it had no fiscal effect on the state or school districts. The training material is available online for free. The cost is one hour of the employee's time only. Yet the amendment is seeking to eliminate the one-hour requirement. Are our youth not worth one hour annually? I urge you to keep the Jason Flatt Act intact. Keep the mandatory hour training in place and continue to make it required by all school personnel. If it saves just one life it will be worth it. And I believe that our youth are worth it.