



House K-12 Education Budget Committee

Proponent Testimony on HB 2582

Brian Geary, Board Member, Olathe Public Schools USD 233

February 19, 2020

Chair Williams and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2582, a bill that would provide additional support for mental health services. The Olathe Public Schools Board of Education is committed to ensuring appropriate services and resources are in place to support the mental health needs of students *and* their families.

Our district appreciates the legislature's continued interest in working with us to address the mental health needs of our students. By working together, we can remove barriers and *increase* access to services that will help improve students' quality of life, including their academic learning and overall social well-being.

In the last three years, Olathe Public Schools have lost ten students and one staff member to suicide. We believe that many of our students and families are in crisis; as a community partner, we want to provide research-based mental health supports to help promote healing and well-being for students, families, staff, and our community.

As the district engaged in a deep dialogue with students, families, and others in the community, we quickly realized that more resources were needed to work with our students and – more startling – they needed to be available to students at a younger age. We also understood that identifying and meeting the mental health needs of our students must be a priority for our district.

The district's building-level support includes school counselors and social workers who are available throughout the day and who can respond to student needs and concerns. However, in a district with 30,000 students located in 58 attendance centers, we do not have the number of counselors, social workers, and school psychologists needed to meet the needs of all students on our own.

Olathe Public Schools invests \$750,000 to employ one full-time social worker at each of our five high schools and five additional social workers to meet the needs of students in the remaining buildings. Although these professionals are incredibly committed to their work and to our students, ten full-time social workers in a district our size is not sufficient to provide the level of support our students need.

The school district has partnered with community providers to offer additional services – both

in our schools and off-site – to ensure that students *and families* have access to support services, including:

- **Professional development.** Olathe Public Schools has invested in trauma-informed care professional development and suicide awareness, prevention, and mental health training. Last Spring, the district partnered with Johnson County Mental Health to train 75 employees in Mental Health First Aid at a cost of approximately \$13,000 plus the cost of \$125 a day for each teacher participating in the training. The district is actively seeking resources to provide additional professional development and in-service training. Investing in training for all personnel means that we stand a greater chance of recognizing the needs of our students before they reach crisis level.
- **H.E.L.P. Clinic (Help Each Live Productively).** This free, short-term counseling service is staffed by school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. School counselors work with families to secure student referrals for six sessions at the H.E.L.P. 39 students received services during the Fall 2019 semester (6 high school, 7 middle school, and 26 elementary school students). Sessions are paid for by the school district at a rate of approximately \$30 per session. If more than six sessions are needed, H.E.L.P. Clinic staff and school counselors work with families to find appropriate referrals.
- **Contract therapists.** Twenty-one of our schools have contract therapists who spend one day each week in the building; many have a waitlist with the demand for services exceeding what we are currently able to provide. So far this year, the district has provided professional support services for 124 students who do not have insurance that covers mental health services. Olathe Public Schools and the Olathe Public School Foundation provide funding for six sessions per student at an average cost of \$60 per session. As of February 7, 2020, we have provided nearly \$44,640 in services. We have received positive feedback from students, staff, and parents, and our goal is to expand the program districtwide.
- **Signs of Suicide (SOS) Prevention Program.** Two years ago, our six high schools began participating in the research-based SOS Prevention Program. School counselors, social workers, and school psychologists train staff and organize lessons. They also prepare the building for outside therapists and district peers who volunteer to screen students who indicate a need for services based on the SOS lesson. This past Fall, twenty Olathe students were immediately hospitalized after the SOS screening due to severe suicidal ideation. We believe this resource saved their lives. This year, nearly 10 percent of our students in each high school building received services.

Dedicated and sustained funding would support existing mental health services and enable Olathe Public Schools and other districts to expand services to meet the needs of even more students and families.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue; we urge you to support HB 2582. If you have any questions, please contact John Allison, superintendent, at (913) 780-8022 or jallison@olatheschools.org.