

November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023

**Testimony on Assembly Bill 575**  
**Assembly Committee on Education**

Thank you, Chairman Kitchens and other Assembly committee members, for having a hearing today on Assembly Bill 575 relating to the mental health training program provided by the Department of Public Instruction.

Knocking on doors last summer, the number one issue I heard, which was surprising to me, was the issue of mental health. Either when it came to students or adults, mental health was one of the top issues. In Governor Evers' State of the State Address, he declared 2023 "The Year of Mental Health". Today's students are experiencing historically high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Even with the end of the pandemic, many students continue to deal with mental challenges that grow and ripple through their lives.

Under current law, DPI must establish a mental health training program under which it provides video training sessions on three specific evidence-based strategies related to addressing mental health issues in schools. However, DPI is not required to distribute this information to school districts.

Assembly Bill 575 looks to address this issue. The bill does three things:

1. DPI must annually distribute information about this mental health training program to school boards, operators of independent charter schools, and the appropriate standing committees of the legislature.
2. Each school board and charter school governing board must develop a plan for addressing mental health issues that arise for school staff members and pupils and must include these DPI-created video training sessions.
3. The bill requires each school board and charter school governing board to annually distribute its mental health plan to all school staff.

We need to work to give our teachers the tools to not only identify students who may be dealing with mental issues but also identify ways for them to get the help they need.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work on this bill with my colleague from the Senate, Senator James. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.



November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023

Representative Kitchens, Chair  
Members of the Assembly Committee on Education

**Testimony on 2023 Assembly Bill 575**

***Relating to: the mental health training program provided by the Department of Public Instruction.***

Thank you, Chairman Kitchens, and other members of the committee, for holding a hearing on Assembly Bill 575 today. The mental health of our children is at a critical point, and combatting this epidemic is going to be a team effort. This bill is asking the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, school boards, and local schools to team up and develop a mental health training plan.

Currently, WI DPI is required to establish a mental health training program for school districts and independent charter schools, touching on screening, intervention, and referral to treatment, creating a trauma sensitive environment, and youth mental health first aid. The odd thing is, although they are required to establish this training, they are not required to do anything with it. What good is this training for our students if it's not even shared with our school boards and teachers? AB 575 aims to correct that.

Under this bill, DPI would be required to circulate this material with school boards, operators of independent charter schools, and the appropriate standing committees of the legislature. After receiving this material, school boards must then create a mental health plan that includes these training tools for their school employees and students on how to address the growing mental health issues the students are facing. Following the formation of this plan, the school board must then share it with all school staff.

I'd like to give an example of one of these modules I found on the WI DPI website, under the Youth Mental Health First Aid supplemental learning series. This was titled "Responding to Youth in Crisis." The module is focused on providing tips to teachers on how to possibly intervene and connect with students that could be struggling with mental health issues. It defines the role of an educator for youth in crisis as someone who should assess, listen, empathize, encourage, and inform. It then walks you through three separate possible scenarios you could run into as an educator with your students and gives examples for how a teacher might offer help in these situations. Just imagine how helpful these modules could be if they were advertised to every teacher in WI.

Our children spend a good portion of their days in schools. Teachers are around our students almost as much as parents are and can provide help to students during a time of crisis. This bill would ensure that schools and teachers have guides on how to best support our kids when they need it most. Thank you, and I will take any questions at this time.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James  
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