



November 20, 2023

The Honorable Denise Garlick  
Chair, Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House, Room 448  
Boston, MA 02133  
[Denise.Garlick@mahouse.gov](mailto:Denise.Garlick@mahouse.gov)

The Honorable Jason M. Lewis  
Chair, Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House, Room 511-B  
Boston, MA 02133  
[Jason.Lewis@masenate.gov](mailto:Jason.Lewis@masenate.gov)

Dear Chair Garlick, Chair Lewis, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Education:

**Re: Testimony in opposition to H.537/S.276, An Act relative to safety and violence education for students (the SAVE Students Act)**

On behalf of the Children's Mental Health Campaign, I write in opposition to H.537/S.276, An Act relative to safety and violence education for students (the SAVE Students Act), heard by the Committee on November 13, 2023.

In an effort to address potential school violence, H.537/S.276 mandates an anonymous tip line for a wide range of student behavior occurring in *any* setting. The provision provides that "any person could report anonymously about unsafe, harmful, dangerous, life-threatening, violent or unlawful activity that occurs or is threatened on school property or that relates to an enrolled student or school personnel." The bill also requires that each public and publicly funded school in the Commonwealth establish a school-based safety assessment team, also known as a threat assessment team, composed of three or more staff members, "to receive notice of any report submitted to the reporting program concerning the school, school personnel or an enrolled student." These teams may, therefore, include police at schools which have police employed as School Resource Officers (SROs).

However, anonymous tip lines and assessment teams neither promote student safety nor improve behavioral health outcomes. Instead, tip lines and assessment teams risk harming students with disabilities, LGBTQ youth, youth of color and youth whose ethnic or cultural

backgrounds may differ from the larger school population. And such measures divert resources that could be better spent on efforts that would actually better protect and benefit students.

**Proposal for an anonymous tip line would harm marginalized students, without offering them and their peers the behavioral health services which are needed**

*Tip lines harm marginalized students, due to implicit biases and bullying, as well as the large numbers of students who have experienced trauma*

Anonymous tip lines risk harming students with marginalized identities, including youth with disabilities, LGBTQ youth, youth of color, and youth whose ethnic or cultural backgrounds may differ from the larger school population. Without any possibility of accountability for the reporter, these youth may be the subject of tips, as reporters flag their “otherness” as threatening or a reason for bullying. Moreover, anonymous tip lines are compromised by the implicit biases that we all have and that contribute to distorted impressions. Such distortions increase the likelihood that marginalized students will be more likely than others to be the subject of tips.

**Proposal for threat assessment teams would harm children through school exclusion, deny students important legal protections, and disproportionately harm students of color and students with disabilities**

*Threat assessment teams result in increases in school exclusions*

In states that have adopted laws such as that proposed by this bill, the result has been the regular exclusion of students from school by decision of the threat assessment team. By excluding students from school, we worsen student outcomes, including school performance, graduating rates, earning power, and criminal legal system involvement, and compromise school climate for all students.

*Threat assessment teams deny students, including students with disabilities, protections to which they are legally entitled*

Moreover, schools routinely have excluded students through the threat assessment process without affording students disciplinary and special educational rights mandated by state and federal law.

*Threat assessment teams disproportionately target students of color and students with disabilities*

Threat assessment, when implemented with fidelity to the currently used model, is prone to bias and disproportionately targets students of color and students with disabilities. This is problematic, because research in Virginia shows that the outcome for most students subject to a threat assessment is discipline.

The disparate effects on students with disabilities are also concerning. A 2018 Albuquerque, New Mexico study found that students with disabilities were referred for threat assessment at

a rate more than three times that of their peers. A 2013 Virginia study found that students with disabilities were referred for threat assessments two-and-a-half times that of their peers.

**Ongoing behavioral health initiatives are best positioned to promote student behavioral health and, in turn, school safety**

We already have the means to screen students, should we need to do so. In addition, we have community-based services available to schools and families.

The Campaign's concerns, and proposed alternatives to enhance student behavioral health, are more fully laid out in a November 20, 2023 memo to the Joint Committee prepared by the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health, appended to this testimony.

The Campaign urges the Legislature to support ongoing initiatives that will have a positive impact on student behavioral health *right now*. We respectfully ask that you to reject the concepts of anonymous tip lines and assessment teams for our schools, and to continue to address school behavioral health and safety in ways that promote student wellbeing rather than further stigmatize students with behavioral health needs or put marginalized students, including youth of color and LGBTQ youth, at increased risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with you to that end.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Nancy Allen Scannell  
Executive Director, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children  
On behalf of the Children's Mental Health Campaign  
(617) 983-5800