

Chairwoman Lee and Committee members,

My name is Emma Quinn and I am from Fargo North Dakota. I work in behavioral health but most importantly I am a mother, a wife, and I myself live with a serious mental illness. I am here in support of SB 2311.

I started to struggle with my mental health at age 12 and started trying to take my own life by age 14. It took me over 14 years to find the proper help for my mental health. As a teenager my life looked fine on the outside, I would put a smile on my face at school and do what was necessary to get through the day, only to go home at night to down a bottle of pills hoping the pain I was enduring inside would end. I tried taking my life countless times before the age 18.

Now as a mother I watch my 14 year old son struggle with the pressures of middle school. In our home we regularly talk about mental health, but it is simply not enough. Most parents are not talking to their children about mental health at home. I don't know if you have had middle schoolers or high schoolers but the last thing they are doing is talking to their parents about their mental health. We need to make sure our schools are a safe place for our children to talk about mental health without judgement.

Our children are dieing, according to the North Dakota HRSI study in 2016, suicide was the second leading cause of death in children ages 15-24 in North Dakota. On Feb 2nd of 2021, just last week, Davis High School in Fargo lost another child to suicide. This child was a Freshman in High School and a loved member of our community.

Our schools are simply not doing enough. Prior to the suicide at Davis, in 2020, I contacted Discovery Middle School in Fargo to talk about bringing more mental health education and suicide prevention into our schools, it was clear as a parent that our schools were lacking in mental health education. I was told that students receive a presentation by FristLink in 6th grade and that counselors are available to talk if need be, that's it. Mental Health education should not be a one and done approach. It should be treated like math, science, and english and taught every year. If we are going to make a real impact on our children's lives we need to break the stigma of mental health and the only way to do that is to talk about it openly and honestly but most important often. We will never stop suicide among children if we keep sweeping it under the rug, especially at school.

After the news of the Davis' freshman suicide I spoke candidly with a friend who also happens to be a teacher within the public school system. She spoke about the districts approach to suicide and admitted that the district is afraid to talk about mental health and suicide because they believe it will encourage others to act. This could not be farther from the truth. Our children need to know that struggling with mental health is not only completely normal but it is something that can be treated. Often people struggling with mental health and suicidal thoughts feel that there is no way out which is what leads to actions of taking their own life.

Schools saying that they are teaching mental health education and suicide prevention is one thing but we need proof. This is why there needs to be some type of reporting system that is tracked by the state superintendent that this work is actually being done. We need to have state standards of education just like we do for core curriculum. This is the only way we can insure every child receives proper mental health education whether they live in Bismarck, Dickinson or Harvey, who also recently lost a middle schooler to suicide.

Suicide is a preventable death and our schools systems need to be apart of the solution. I am afraid if this bill is not passed our children will continue to take their own lives because there is simply not enough support and education around mental health. I ask for your support of SB 2311 because our children's lives are at stake and they deserve a fighting chance.