

Boston Alliance for Community Health

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The Boston Alliance for Community Health (BACH), an alliance of neighborhood coalitions, hospitals, health centers, community-based organizations and residents supports the passage of H520/S210 (An Act Relative to Safe and Supportive Schools).

The aims of this legislation are consistent with BACH's vision of *a Boston that is vibrant, just, and equitable, where all people who live, work, play, pray, and learn here have optimal health and well-being and enjoy a supportive environment and a sense of safety and belonging- regardless of who they are, what neighborhood they live in, or where they come from.*

Our reasoning is based on the evidence that completing high school is a determinant of the chances of having a healthy adulthood. In order for children to complete school, they need safe, supportive environments in order to learn and that a positive school environment is essential for academic achievement. Yet our laws do not yet support schools to make their environments supportive and engaging for all children.

The benefits of school-based behavioral health services are well documented. Studies have shown that universal school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) programs have:

- improved academic performance by 11 to 17 percentile points
- increased positive connections to school
- reduced conduct problems

At a local level, this need was borne out in a 2012 survey of Boston Public School leaders, which found that 66% of schools identified behavioral health services as a high or the highest priority

For those with serious emotional needs, national studies have shown that academic and functional gains were greatest when services were comprehensive and integrated into the school. Providing these services in school settings makes sense because it's where children spend a majority of their time and where behavioral issues often first surface.

Integrating and promoting positive behavioral health skills:

- has potential to reduce the misidentification of students as having emotional or behavioral difficulties, and

**IMPROVING HEALTH THROUGH
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS, NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING AND
COLLECTIVE ACTION**

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- when emotional or behavioral difficulties are identified, schools provide a familiar, unthreatening or stigmatizing environment for parents to engage in conversations about their child’s behavior

Recognizing the value of this type of student support in promoting better academic, health and life outcomes has prompted two of BACH’s member organizations, Boston Public Schools and Boston Children’s Hospital, to participate in the State Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force that developed the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework referenced in the legislation, and collaborate on the development of a district-wide comprehensive behavioral health model that will enact the recommendations called for in the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework.

The anticipated benefits for students include Instruction in pro-social skills, Increased positive behaviors and Improved academic performance.

The anticipated benefits for schools include Integrated academic and socio-emotional learning, Increased time spent on teaching and learning, and Improved school climate and student engagement.

Requiring schools to make action plans using the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework will help schools make sure their culture is welcoming and engaging for students with behavioral health challenges, and for all students. This bill does not add a new burden on top of schools; rather, the Framework helps schools organize what they already have in place and helps them maximize their resources to do what they already have to do. Schools already spend lots of time on behavioral issues—providing safe and supportive learning environments will offer a more effective approach. This bill will help schools form productive partnerships with outside providers and to use their own resources effectively and productively. It is a critical but missing piece of education reform.

We believe that because schools need to address numerous, often competing requirements, it is important to make clear statement that creating safe and supportive environments for all students is critical for learning. This legislation will ensure that this essential ingredient to learning will become incorporated into the day-to-day operations of all schools and rather than leaving it to the discretion of individual school leaders.

That said, we urge the legislature to ensure that the provisions of this bill are adequately funded so that students and their parents will know that the schools are safe and supportive environments that will help assure the overall health of our communities over the next decades.

Sincerely,

David Aronstein, MSW

Director