
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Wednesday, October 19, 2022, at 12:00 p.m., via Zoom to hold a meeting and take testimony with respect to the Department of Children and Families' proposal to dismantle the School Based Youth Services Program and replace it with the New Jersey Statewide Support Services network"

LOCATION: Meeting via Zoom

DATE: October 19, 2022
12 p.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair
Senator Joseph P. Cryan, Co-Chair
Senator Renee C. Burgess
Senator Declan J. O'Scanlon, Jr.
Senator Michael L. Testa, Jr.
Senator Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblyman Ralph R. Caputo
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly
Assemblywoman Victoria A. Flynn
Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis
Assemblyman Erik K. Simonsen



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca DiBenedetti
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

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Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey

SENATE

Hon. James Beach
Hon. Renee C. Burgess
Hon. Joseph P. Cryan
Hon. Declan J. O’Scanlon, Jr.
Hon. Michael L. Testa
Hon. Samuel D. Thompson



JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Wednesday, October 19, 2022, at 12:00 p.m., via Zoom to hold a meeting and take testimony with respect to the Department of Children and Families’ proposal to dismantle the School Based Youth Services Program and replace it with the New Jersey Statewide Support Services network.

The public may address comments and questions to Rebecca DiBenedetti, Executive Director, at 609-847-3365, or by email at Rsapp@njleg.org

Issued October 7, 2022

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ASSEMBLYWOMAN MILA M. JASEY (Chair): So, good morning members, guests, and all who have joined us today.

I am Assemblywoman Mila Jasey and my Co-Chair Senator Joe Cryan and I have convened this meeting of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools to examine the New Jersey School Based Youth Services Program, otherwise known as NJSBYSP.

The Joint Committee was created by statute to conduct ongoing studies of every aspect of our educational system to inform policy and make recommendations for legislative action. The Department of Children and Families has announced that it will eliminate the long-standing SBYSP at the end of this school year. The plan is to replace it with NJ4S, the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services -- regionally based hubs which would be mobilized upon request to support schools and deliver services in the community.

Before we begin, I would like to recognize our newest member, Senator Renee Burgess, who represents the 28th District. Welcome, Senator.

SENATOR BURGESS: Good morning, everybody, thank you for that; I appreciate it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And, we look -- I look forward to working very closely with you.

SENATOR BURGESS: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: So, first, I think I should ask Becky to call the roll. And, then, yes-- I am going to ask my Co-Chair, Senator Cryan, if he would like to say a few words before we start.

Becky, the roll call.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

Senator Burgess.

SENATOR BURGESS: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator O'Scanlon.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Testa.

SENATOR TESTA: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Thompson. (no response)

He is here.

Assemblyman Caputo.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Flynn.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Matsikoudis.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MATSIKOUDIS: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblyman Simonsen.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: And, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN (Co-Chair): Here,

thanks.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

As I said, we have a lot of guests who want to testify and who are scheduled, including DCF Commissioner Beyer, who will be the first speaker. I would ask that our guests limit your remarks to five to seven minutes to make sure that every guest can speak and that there is sufficient time for questions. We are limited to two hours, but we can reconvene if necessary.

Legislators who are not members of the Committee are asked to place their questions in the chat, so that if we don't get to them today, we can send them to DCF.

Senator Cryan, would you like to say a few words as my Co-Chair?

SENATOR CRYAN: Well, Chair, I wanted to thank you for bringing us together.

I am very interested, not only in the subject matter, but, in particular, I would like to ask the speakers as you prepare your remarks -- I know most of you have them pre-planned -- talk to us about how those services are delivered, whether it's under the new proposal or under the current proposal, what you see as right and what you see as wrong. I think that the unifying factor here is that everybody wants to see services delivered. I think we're talking about the best ways to how and to who.

So, with that, I'd like to focus our conversation -- at least part of the conversation -- on how that gets done under the current method, and, obviously, the proposed method as well.

Looking forward to the discussion and, quite frankly, looking forward to having the most opportunity for our young people to have the services they need.

So, thank you, Chair.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Co-Chair.

And, with that we'd like to start with Christine Beyer.

Commissioner Beyer.

CHRISTINE NORBUT BEYER: Yes, hello.

Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before the panel today.

My name is Christine Norbut Beyer, and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families.

I want to thank Chairwoman Jasey and the Joint Committee members for their interest in New Jersey Statewide Student Services Network, or NJ4S.

Unfortunately, I am not able to stay for the hearing today, because of a scheduling conflict, but I was very happy that I could rearrange a window in my schedule to testify on this very important initiative. The Department is eager to launch this innovative statewide model for student wellness.

Right now, in New Jersey and around the country, we're facing a youth mental-health crisis that requires innovation and bold new thinking. The United States Surgeon General recently issued a report entitled, "Protecting Youth Mental Health," which highlights how the pandemic has altered the world that children and youth knew before. In New

Jersey, DCF commissioned a study from Rutgers and the Eagleton Institute of Politics to learn more about families during the pandemic. That study told us that 34% of parents in our state -- that translates to roughly 340,000 families -- report that their school-aged child has experienced prolonged episodes of poor or only fair mental health.

We know from these and other sources that the lasting trauma caused by COVID has created some deep scars on our state's collective psyche. It's clear that youth mental health is a public health emergency, and a statewide crisis like this demands statewide solutions. Right now, we have an extraordinary opportunity, and an unprecedented responsibility to ensure access and equity in support of youth mental wellness. That's what NJ4S offers.

The hub-and-spoke model we have proposed allows for 15 hubs that would organize and administer services to the schools and communities to which they are assigned. A common misconception that we've heard since we announced this concept is that students would need to travel or be transported to the hub for services, but, that is not at all accurate. As we described in the concept paper we released a few weeks ago, NJ4S services will continue to be available locally in schools and trusted local sites like libraries and community centers. There is no transportation barrier associated with NJ4S. In fact, the hub might not even have to be a physical location; it's simply a provider that acts as a connector of services to the spaces that need them.

Schools are, and will continue to be, a primary space for prevention and intervention services for youth. But, so are community centers and faith-based organizations, libraries, and even their homes. Not

every youth wants to access services in school, and they should have the option to access services where they feel most comfortable and physically and emotionally safe. NJ4S allows for choices and options for service delivery that don't currently exist for youth and families. And, through NJ4S, youth and families will have a direct voice in this system to tell their hubs what they want -- what services they want, and where they can easily access them. NJ4S expands the options for service delivery locations by adding to schools, not removing them from the system.

We're creating a statewide network of supports for students and their families offered to all New Jersey school districts that recognizes the whole family, because children in crisis sometimes have families in crisis. It's an efficient platform for deeper investment that provides the ability to leverage existing resources and fully support social and emotional health and learning of students in New Jersey. The hubs will dispatch a standard set of supports and services to schools, libraries, community centers, and other local spokes with local adaptations that leverage the best approaches the field has to offer so that no matter where a New Jersey student lives, they can be assured the ability to access a core set of high-quality services and programming.

This is a ground-breaking proposal, and one that is getting positive attention from leaders across the country. We're using a tried-and-true model that increases efficiency and service delivery; that reduces duplication of effort; utilizes evidence-based programming -- which is what the Federal Government looks for in the provision of grants and other funding streams; and includes trackable, shareable metrics, with clear and transparency outcome (indiscernible).

NJ4S will use evidence-based approaches to both prevention -- meaning efforts to prevent bullying, violence, substance use, or mental-health problems before they occur -- as well as intervention -- meaning intervening after a young person who is already in distress. Evidence-based programs are interventions that have been rigorously evaluated by an independent third party to demonstrate effectiveness. They have shown not only to work, but also to not cause harm. Evidence-based approaches exist in public health, in social service, and mental-health treatment among other fields. When we face a crisis of this magnitude, we need to be sure we are using approaches that are effective, because we don't have time to lose. Evidence-based programs and resources offer consistent, clear criteria and metrics, and can be replicated with fidelity to a proven model.

One example of an evidence-based program is Familias Unidas, a family center, drug use, and sexual-risk behavior prevention program designed specifically for Hispanic youth and their families. It helps empower parents to speak with their teen children about how to prevent drug use and sexual-risk behaviors. The program has clearly articulated goals; a description of essential program components; and has been evaluated and validated from multiple randomized control trials.

In addition to providing these prevention services, as well as mental-health services for students, programming through NJ4S will connect with the broader infrastructure of mental-health supports this administration has been building and expanding since 2018 -- including, just briefly, the Children's System of Care; the DREAMS Program; suicide-prevention programs; and the recently launched 988 system.

The New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services network will create a statewide network of supports for students and their families offered to all New Jersey school districts. We meet students where they are, by providing services in schools as well as a variety of other locations. The specific delivery locations will be determined with local input to meet local need. The program will recognize the whole family. In addition to the individual student as the focus of support and to increase academic achievement as well as emotional safety and well-being, it will provide a set of supports and services with local adaptations that leverage the best approaches the field has to offer so that no matter where a New Jersey student lives, they can be assured of the ability to access a core set of high-quality services in the program.

It will involve communities in designing implementation and integrate programming within the communities, with schools at the center of a broader network of available services and supports for students. And, it will intentionally integrate -- with existing statewide and community-based services and supports for school-aged youth -- to maximize public funding and avoid duplication of services.

Hubs will employ key staff and may be implemented by social-service agencies selected through a competitive RFP process, either singling or in partnership with other social-service agencies. Social-service agencies that currently provide school-linked services will be eligible and encouraged to apply to be a hub. DCF will work with the statewide network of hubs to deploy training and facilitate connections to other areas of statewide youth mental-health infrastructure.

With respect to the current School Based Youth Services Programs, we know that they are valued by -- and valuable for -- the 86 schools in which they operate. Their positive impact on the youth they serve is the inspiration for NJ4S, and what we hope to make available to the other 2,400 schools in New Jersey, which currently do not receive any level of School Based Youth Service support from the State. However, due to budget and program constraints of the current model, School Based Youth Services cannot be scaled to statewide capacity. And, frankly, that presents an equity issue.

A recent report from New Jersey Policy Perspective shows that access to mental-health supports for Black students has decreased over the last decade. To quote, “Black youth suicide among 10- to-19-year-old boys has soared 60% since 2017,” according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Suicide has also plagued Black girls, with a 59% increase between 2013 and 2019. All of this pre-pandemic. Black children younger than 13 are now twice as likely to die by suicide compared to white children of the same age. Those numbers are devastating and unacceptable, and we have a responsibility *and* the opportunity, now, here in New Jersey, to ensure that we are reaching all students with a baseline of supports to change these trends and save lives.

Right now, for example, the city of Newark has 64 public schools. Just two receive in-school supports. In Camden, there are 19 schools -- only six receive services. Help for some of our most at-risk youth is currently lacking in our schools; NJ4S will change that. We firmly believe that this is the right approach to benefit all of New Jersey’s students. We

know that individuals who take the time to review the concept paper have found a lot to like about this concept.

We also recognize that this is a large systemic change. As we launch this statewide network, we want to continue to have an open dialogue to ensure we're meeting student needs to the best of our abilities. In addition to the work group that has convened over the last year, we released the concept paper and opened it up for public comment, because we want input on how to make this transition most effective. I know many of those here today have met with myself and my team and the Governor's Office, both prior to the release of the concept paper, and in the weeks since, to discuss the proposal, answer questions, and offer clarifications.

We continue to welcome those conversations. We will be releasing a Frequently Asked Questions document today on our website as well. We'll make sure that gets out to all of you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Commissioner.

MS. BEYER: Also, I want to make it clear since we announced this proposal that we want to ensure continuity of supports for students throughout this transition. At the end of the day, we cannot shift our focus away from what students need during this unprecedented health crisis.

NJ4S delivers the services and support students need and deserve, delivering on the intended promise of School Based Youth Services, but for the remaining 2,400 schools not currently receiving School-Based programming.

So, thank you, and again, I'm sorry that I do have to leave. If you have any questions that aren't answered in the Department's FAQ

document that we'll be releasing, please email us. In addition, I have staff listening into the hearing to bring back any and all questions and comments, so, I just want to thank you, and have a great afternoon, everyone.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Commissioner. I recognize that your time is short.

I think at the heart of this issue is the prize, or the lack of awareness, among current providers that this was happening. And, that's why the Joint Committee and the Black and Latino Caucuses have had this on our agenda, to find out more about.

So, everything that you said is very encouraging, but I think a big issue has been the lack of the information getting to the people who needed to hear about it. Or, perhaps, were not at the table. So, I hope that this hearing today is the very beginning of more open communication, because I don't think anyone on this Zoom would disagree with anything that you said today. We all know that we need these services, and we're looking for better ways to meet the needs of our children and families.

So, with that, I will open it -- I will ask the next-- We have a number of people who are signed up to testify, and I want everyone--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Chairwoman, I just have a quick question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: I know the Commissioner has to leave, but does she have staff that's staying on?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: She does, she does, yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: All right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, thank you.

OK, so, we're going to move on with those -- we have, I think 12 people who are scheduled to give testimony. I would ask that you keep your testimony as brief as possible so that we have time for discussion.

Next up is Tony Trongone, Superintendent of the Millville Public Schools.

TONY TRONGONE: Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey, and also Senator Cryan, and our home Senator Mike Testa and Assemblyman Simonsen.

Good morning, members -- or, good afternoon, now. My name is Tony Trongone, as mentioned. I am the Superintendent of Millville Public Schools, a high-needs school district in Cumberland County. And, I currently serve as President of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. I have also served as Superintendent in Pemberton Township Schools, in Burlington County, for a number of years, and it's another high-need school district that also provides students with a School Based Youth Services Program.

I am here to talk about the implementation of the NJ4S hub-and-spoke model proposed by the Department of Child and Families, and the disbanding of School Based Youth Services programs as per the communication on the status of such on October 6, and I have audio of DCF staff stating such, and it will be on the Millville website, for those who are interested in it.

Not one to assume what the topic at hand entails, I would like to explain the School Based Youth Services Program as it is implemented in Millville, and it is called The Link. It is a program embedded in the Millville High School learning community for more than 17 years. It is a

one-stop-shop that provides our students with a multitude of support systems. The Link provides mental-health counseling. The Link works in concert with, and receives referrals from, the supports we provide our kids in Millville -- school counseling, child study teams, social workers, nurses, instructional staff and administration. The Link also provides counseling and individual counseling to our students, addressing coping skills, regulating emotions, and interpersonal skills. The Link triages, and in triages that continue (indiscernible) of our students when our students experience and reach that level of crisis.

A little bit of technical difficulty, sorry.

The Link facilitates with parents and school staff services when our students experience crisis, linking them with the children's system of care, as well as other highly regarded resources. The Link provides our students with employment services, connecting local businesses with our students; helping students complete online applications; providing resume building; interview skill sessions; and, in regards to medical care -- simply put, The Link is an urgent care, on the school, with parental consent.

More importantly, I believe what separates The Link from the hub-and-spoke process is the multifaceted manner in which our students gain entrance into seeking mental-health services. Many of you are all well aware of the stigma mental health holds with adolescents and their reticence to seek help for their mental health. Students stop in at The Link during their lunch period and join in after-school activities to engage in recreational and social events. It provides our students time to foster familiarity, trust, and confidence.

And, after a few visits, the kids open up and are able to connect with an adult in The Link program. They're not knocking on the door at some strip mall or some library, saying, "I need help."

Committee members, please take note of this nuance of students and their reticence to seek help, and the barriers and social constructs The Link removes in order for students to gain access to mental-health services. In school districts in Cumberland County -- a rural county, and the poorest county in New Jersey -- access to service proves to be a significant barrier. Poverty, no doubt, is a barrier to children seeking mental-health services. Compound that with living in rural poverty, and you can imagine a lack of services and the barriers in accessing the services our students need. Committee Members, please take note of the nuance in students and their ability, or lack thereof, to seek support and services being in rural poverty.

And, now, for the proposed transition to the NJ4S hub-and-spoke model. I'm not going to refute its efficacy. Some of my colleagues will go deeper in that area and follow me. What I'm concerned with is the implementation. I have 25 years of experience in education, and 20 years experiencing successfully implemented curricula and other school programs. Engagement of key stakeholders is lacking in this process of the hub and spoke. Understanding of the hub-and-spoke model by stakeholders is lacking in this process. It looks as though the components explained today, this morning, by the Commissioner, are new to many of us, as Assemblywoman Jasey mentioned, and they have not been part of the correspondence to-date.

Nothing has been mentioned to-date about what the spokes will provide; just the hub, which we knew was going to be more on

the administrative end than providing the therapies which are currently provided in schools.

And last, its confidence and trust in what is and what is not going to be implemented on July 1 that is lacking. So, most importantly and critically, we are not putting a reading program or changing the school's schedule. We're dealing with children's lives and their mental well-being and the services and support they receive and need to cope during normal times, but now magnified post-pandemic.

I strongly recommend that NJ4S spoke-and-hub model should be implemented in addition to, not in place of, existing School Based Youth Service Programs. A study evaluation for three years should take place, as Assemblywoman Jasey's bill has stated. Have some evaluation done, and a determination of status be determined. Anything less will be deleterious to our children.

A riveting video of student voices and their experiences regarding current School Based Youth Services at the Millville Link was sent to this Committee, and can be available to others upon request on the Millville Public Schools website at www.Millville.org.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you all today.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Superintendent.

That -- I think that was a great way to start, and a good summation of where we are and why we're here today. And, I look forward to reading the testimony that will be -- can be made available to any member after this, if you would like it.

Next up, Rosie Grant, Executive Director of the Paterson Education Fund.

SENATOR CRYAN: And, Mila, can I just ask a very--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, absolutely.

SENATOR CRYAN: So, we won't delve into questions for each commentator, but I would like to ask the Commissioner's staff -- the Superintendent mentioned the July 1 deadline. And, if it's feasible for those of us -- whether we have 25 years or two minutes -- we know sometimes that government schedules may be a little aggressive at times.

So, my request, Mila, with you, I hope, is to ask the Commissioner's office for a schedule of when those RVs are going to go out, when they would be awarded, how that would all work, and how that would fit into a July 1 timeframe. Which, at least from this fellow's experience, seems somewhat aggressive.

If that's OK.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: It's absolutely OK, and I made a note; we will do that.

Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

OK, Rosie, are you here?

R O S I E G R A N T: I am here, thank you.

Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and members of the Committee.

I am Rosie Grant, I am the Executive Director of Paterson Education Fund. We have two School Based Youth Services Programs in

Paterson, and I want to say, we do desperately need to address the youth mental-health crises.

However, we believe that this can be done without dismantling the current system that is serving our children so well. The hub-and-spokes model cannot deliver the services to the most vulnerable at the same level as School Based Youth Services is doing now. Unless there is access in schools, access will be an issue regardless of transportation -- even if it's in the same town. Kids will have to lose school time or find time outside of school to access the services.

I think this is a social justice issue; we're taking services away from the neediest in order to serve everyone. This is inequity. It's the very opposite of equity. Because, the young people who currently have the services are about to have the rug pulled out from under them. Yes, I want to see all kids access the services, but can we do it without taking away funding from School Based Youth Services?

I do want to list some of the programs they provide, because I think it's important that we know. They provide educational enhancement services; individual family mental-health counseling; substance-abuse counseling; leadership development; life skills; health and nutrition counseling; antiviolence workshops; employment counseling; employment placement; recreational cultural activities; teen pregnancy counseling and parenting counseling; parenting workshops; emergency childcare services for the teen parents; gang awareness; peer influence; self esteem; bullying; social media awareness.

Many of these happen in the summer as well, because they have a summer bridge program to help ninth graders adjust for the move from

middle school to high school. We have 390 students who are receiving learning supports; 182 employment-related services; 112 mental-health services. They are doing field trips to expand the worldview. I know adults in Paterson who have never left the city for their entire lives. We live in a global world, and our kids need this exposure.

The outcome is 100% of the students in the program over the last several years remained in school or graduated. A hundred percent of the students who received mental-health supports have improved their emotional well-being. They are getting the support that they're needing; they're happier; they're graduating; they're healthier; and they'll lead more hopeful and productive lives.

Please leave this program in place while we sort out what we do for all of our children. We certainly support services to everyone. However, we need to give the most needy what they need. And, we're doing that. So, that is my ask today, is that we continue to do that.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Rosie, and a very reasonable ask, at that.

Again, I remind members who are on this call today, you can get a transcript of the testimony, because we're not going to be able to have a long Q&A because of all the people that we have on. But, everyone speaking today has really important information to share.

Next up is Edward Tetelman, former Assistant Commissioner, Department of Human Services, who designed the School Based Youth Services Program in 1985 and implemented it in 1986.

Thank you.

E D W A R D T E T E L M A N: Thank you, Madam Chairman, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to talk about the School-Based Program.

When we began this program, it was quite unique. I was with the Public Advocate Office at the time, and we were looking at different adolescent issues -- mental-health issues, healthcare issues, all sorts of employment issues. And, those were not good times; those were really bad times, in fact. And, I didn't speak to the Commissioner when, two years ago, she tried to eliminate the program, and she just said to me, "Well, times have changed." And, I said to her, "No, times have not changed. It is the same -- youth are facing the same issues."

And, I agree with what other people have said. If she wants to start a whole new program, let her start a whole new program; keep the School-Based Program. The School-Based Program is designed to help young people navigate the adolescent years; finish their education; obtain skills leading to employment and continuing education; and graduate healthy and drug free. All the programs are community collaborations -- they're between schools *and* the community. That was required in our RFP, and, so, you really see a strong connection there.

And, the core services -- it wasn't just mental health. It was employment services; it was primary and preventative healthcare services; it was substance abuse; it was employment; it was teen pregnancy programs. It was-- We thought these were really important things, and, most importantly, when we put the program together-- And, by the way, we took about a year and a half just to organize the program before we attempted to implement it. We spoke to everybody. We spoke to the teachers, the

supervising principals, the superintendents, the Business and Industry Association. We went out to all sorts of community organizations and spoke to them.

And, most importantly, we spoke to the young people; the students. I, personally, went out and talked to them, and they told us over and over again they wanted a safe place within their schools or nearby that they could go and receive services. And, they were looking for trusting adults -- caring adults -- that they could talk to. And, that's the way we designed this program. And, that's at the heart of the program.

In comparison to what the Commissioner is proposing -- instead of having it at the school, she's pulling it away and putting it out in the region. And, even though she says, "Oh, yeah, well, we'll send people to the school," that's not the way students act; that isn't the way young people are going to access programs. They don't want to go to an office to speak to somebody. They want to have an ongoing relationship with individuals. And, that's the success of the program: It's that ongoing, trusting relationship with caring adults who champion them that make all the difference.

In addition, the Commissioner forgot to also mention that in 1991, the School Based Program won, for New Jersey, the first time, the Harvard Kennedy School of Government Ford Foundation Innovations Grant. I mean, we were recognized nationally for this program. Indeed, at the National Governor's Association -- Governor Kean was the Governor at the time -- and we presented it, the program, with some of the children that were there, and Governor Clinton was there. And, afterwards, Governor Clinton, after presenting the program, Governor Clinton came up to Governor Kean and said to him, "Are you sure you're a Republican?" He

loved this program; Governor Kean loved this program. This had tremendous bipartisan support when we introduced this program.

It's also been expanded, as far as I know-- I left the Department of Human Services in 2001 to become the State's Public Guardian, but every Governor, up to Governor Christie, expanded the School-Based Program. There's a reason for that -- because it worked for young people, and it made a difference in their lives.

Now, I just want to talk a little bit about the Commissioner's program. One of the things she said to folks is--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Ed?

MR. TETELMAN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And, I want to hear that, but can you keep it brief? Because I have a long list of--

MR. TETELMAN: OK. I'll just add a couple of things.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right, thank you.

MR. TETELMAN: One, the Commissioner, even though she said she likes the program, point in fact, just two years ago she tried to eliminate the program. She really doesn't like the program. She has her own program that she wants to implement with her legacy. If she really doesn't like the program, don't keep it in DCF -- move it back to Human Services, and put it in the Commissioner's office; that's where it was.

In addition, you know, this program has been recognized nationally. Twentieth century learning centers are based on this program; the expansion in Kentucky has School-Based Programs; this is an important program.

And, in fact, (indiscernible) to eliminate this program, especially as abruptly as she intends, some students are going to perish.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank, you, Ed.

I look forward to continued conversation with you, certainly.

Before we go on to the next speaker, who is Jeremiah LaPorte, a student at STEM Academy in Elizabeth, New Jersey, I want to recognize that Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz is on the call, has been listening, and is very much involved.

Would you like to speak, Senator?

SENATOR TERESA M. RUIZ: Thank you, Chair.

And, to both Chairs, I lost sight of -- there he is in that box, Senator Cryan, and Assemblywoman Mila Jasey, I think we were in the throws of this two years ago, as Ed had mentioned, when the program was cut out of the budget and everyone I can almost attest to that was elected really got engaged.

Again, here we are at another crossroads. I just wanted to commend all of the members on today's Committee hearing. And, Chairwoman Jasey, as you know, we had a very robust conversation from both caucuses, the Latino Caucus and the African American Caucus of the New Jersey Legislature, where we expressed our disconcert with what is happening yet again. And, of course, no one ever wants to support programs that don't function.

We encourage accountability; we promote cooperation amongst the departments; and undoubtedly, we want every child in New Jersey who sits as a student in our school systems who is in need of mental-

health resources to get those accessible points. But, it cannot be at the expense of losing the infrastructure that we currently have in place.

I think Rosie said it, and the Superintendent who opened up the discussion -- if I am in a school building where I feel comfortable, and I see Mr. Caputo on a daily basis and he is responsible for reaching out and checking in with my mental health, I am also going to be meeting with him on a level of not nearly understanding what's happening during that session, but knowing that I am in a building where I feel safe, and with an individual that I connect with and I trust. We know that it's a stigma in our communities to even talk about mental health and the need for therapy, and, so, making sure that it's consistent; that it's connected; and that it's equitable in a way where communities who are usually disenfranchised from receiving these resources or who don't necessarily go out and reach out for the programs, that we don't disturb the great work that you all are currently doing.

So, again, Chair, thank you for having this discussion. Consider me a partner, an advocate, an ally, and a force in this as we proceed forward.

All in favor of expansion, but not at the expense of the current programs that are working.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Majority Leader, I really do -- I think all of us appreciate your support, and know that it is genuine.

And, I know that you can't stay on for the entire time, but we'll make sure that your office has a transcript.

Jeremiah LaPorte, are you on?

J E R E M I A H L a P O R T E: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK.

MR. LaPORTE: Hi.

Good afternoon, respective Committee members.

My name is Jeremiah LaPorte, I am a 16-year-old junior attending the JVJ STEM Academy in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Today, I would like to share with you my story and why I disdain from the acceptance of the New Jersey School Based Youth Program dismantlement proposal.

During my childhood, I loved writing poems, singing songs, and speaking. I could talk for eons about things I was passionate about. However, in 2018, during my eighth-grade year, I went through a highly traumatic event. At that time, I lived in Atlantic County with no access to a School-Based Youth Services Program. I moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 2020 during the pandemic for a fresh start. At that point, I had stopped singing and writing. I did not attend school for a few months. I didn't speak to anyone; I didn't do anything; I just stopped.

I eventually decided I was ready to try and ease back to school, only because it was easier to suppress everything than it is to sit in it. So, I began attending the John Dwyer Technology Academy. At the end of my ninth-grade year, I was introduced to the YES program, the Elizabeth stand of the New Jersey School Based Youth Services Program, where I met with (indiscernible) who was my counselor for two years. She was the first person to get me to open up with her, and the rest of the YES program team's help, with counseling, study groups, summer programs, and far more -- as well

as things like college applications and mental-health initiatives and help that I and so many truly needed.

It has been three years now since the incident. With the help of the YES program, I came out of my shell. I've grown into someone I never thought I would be. I am now a 16-year-old mental-health and educational advocate seated on the board of three nonprofit organizations, and running to be my high school representative for my district.

I believe dismantling the New Jersey School Based Youth Services will be a highly regrettable and detrimental action by far. Replacing the SBYSP with the planned 15 regional hubs will have consequences beyond those we already heavily face. The call to action that led to the NJ4S was because there was a lax amount of immediate mental-health attestability. The School Based Youth Services Program is one of the oldest and most influential statewide programs that gives the immediate accessibility inside the schools already in implementation with high success rates.

The NJ4S will take that away. There are 21 counties in New Jersey, which means that these regions are generalized and far less accessible than thought to be, spread throughout New Jersey's 15 court districts. Even with the new implementation, that will deter. I believe the implementation alone is not on par. Dismantling an infrastructure so beneficial to students right now. Students in these high-flood distressed districts will be 10 times more likely to fail than they were already betted to be in the beginning, waiting for the, "Employment of emergency on-site teams that could be too late."

Impartiality in this is not an option. We need you to look at this as if your children, your future, and your health is on the line. Because

our future and health *is* on the line. Expanding, engaging the School Based Youth Services Program is the best possible option here. We have seen the help the School Based Youth Services Program can do, providing only reaching to 2% of the students. It is more beneficial and impactful action. If we move forward with this, we will be rebuilding barriers brought down over 50 years ago -- scheduling; domestic fallback; counterproductivity; all pushing and feeding to the suppression and stigmatism of youth mental health, especially in low-income areas.

New York and Delaware School Based Youth Services Program are already models of their own, showing the benefits of the program along with the detriments that they moved past from times without.

We cannot go back. We are a precedent set. If we fall backwards, we are bound to failure. The past is the past, learn from it; the future is ahead of you, prepare for it; and the present is here, live in it. We cannot live in the past; it is bound to chaos. We must go forward from where we are, and move forward. We must progress.

I encourage you all today to reject this proposal, and instead, embrace the gift we already have. Expand the School Based Youth Services. As of now, it only reaches 2%; with an expansion, we can reach 100% soon.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Jeremiah.

Are you at school now?

MR. LaPORTE: I am.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That's what I thought, that's what I thought.

What grade are you in now?

MR. LaPORTE: I am a junior.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: You're a junior. And what are you studying?

MR. LaPORTE: Biomedical science, and foreign policy.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Excellent, that's wonderful.

I am a very strong proponent of student voice, having served on the Board of Education in my district for three terms.

Thank you very much for giving us your time and your testimony and your insights today. We will have a transcript of your remarks, so if you have to go back to class, that's fine.

Thank you so much; appreciate it.

MR. LaPORTE: Have a good day.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Next up-- I'm sorry, Senator Cryan. Go ahead.

No? OK.

Next up, we'd like to hear from David Aderhold, Superintendent of West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District.

David.

DAVID ADERHOLD, Ed.D.: Assemblywoman, thank you for the invitation today.

I want to thank you and Senator Cryan, as well as members of the Joint Committee, for allowing me to speak today.

So, I found myself not encouraged at all by the Commissioner's comments, because she really just doubled down on the

NJ4S, and she's not hearing the feedback from the field. What she said is that a spoke-and-hub model is moving full forward. But, what she's not hearing is the devastating impact it's going to make to the 91 schools in 62 districts that currently have students serviced, to their report, somewhere between 25,000-30,000 students directly impacted.

You might be asking yourself, why is the Superintendent of a non-School Based Youth Services Program testifying in support of School Based? And that's because as a principal 15 years ago, I served as a principal in New Brunswick High School, and I had the great opportunity to work with the School Based Youth Services Program in New Brunswick, where we had four onsite clinicians. School Based Youth Services is instrumental to providing individual group counseling, psychoeducational groups, the young development.

And, you know, thank you to Mr. Tetelman for the vision that you had 35, 37 years ago, because everything that you envisioned came through. All the ability to provide direct services to students with caring and trusted adults, on school grounds, with connections to resources within the community, came through in the vision of the School Based Youth Services model that is being attempted to being dismantled by the current DCF for the second time in two years, right? And we can't let that happen. We cannot let that happen, because children are going to be hurt by that program -- by an attempt to move it away.

What they're essentially trying to create is think of our current DCP&P, Division of Children Protection and Permanency. You call a hotline, you get someone who gives a response for immediate, 24 hour, seven days. There's not going to be enough clinicians when you take \$30

million, add \$15 in, and a little bit of grant funding, and then try to then expand it to 100%.

We don't even think that 100% is needed -- and, why do I say that? I'm in Mercer County. There are two School Based Youth Services programs in Mercer County: Ewing and Trenton. My colleague James Earle and friend James Earle is on the call and will testify. The other seven districts all have programs, right? We have UBHC, Effective School Solutions, the SAGE Program, comprehensive medical health, and one program has four social workers. But, we have all recognized that mental health is so vitally important that we have all created in-house, in-district, district-funded programs with district dollars.

Because we have-- So, in WWP, I worked with the University Behavioral Health Center, Rutgers University. We pay about \$550,000 annually to have four onsite clinicians and management support from their organization. It's invaluable. We're going into our fourth -- fifth year, now, coming up, with working with them. They provide onsite support to our students; they work with individual group and family therapy; crisis intervention and screening; consultation with CST; guidance; teachers; outpatients. Essentially, we replicated the School Based Youth Services Program in WWP, because it's an effective model that brings caring and trusted clinicians that have access and understanding of the mental-health and hospitalization system that's in our state, and insurance, and they work with families and schools onsite and they provide a direct access of care.

You can't take this away from New Brunswick or Trenton. And, you know what, I need to talk about New Brunswick for a second, because New Brunswick moved away from School Based this year. And, you

may hear that used as an argument to support defunding School Based. And, don't buy into it. What happened is, the community partner is a great organization called New Brunswick Tomorrow, was having difficulty finding clinicians -- because there's a shortage in the profession. New Brunswick Tomorrow then was outsourcing, essentially, spoke and hub; outsourcing the counseling. And, then there was challenges with communication; getting information back from the outside therapists; figuring out how to coordinate care. And, what did New Brunswick do, because of the state aid increase they received in dollars? They created an in-house program with four onsite clinicians. I happen to know those individuals from working there, two of them that work in the program. They're tremendous individuals that have given a lifetime of support to the school. They trained the administration in crisis intervention services; they trained the staff; they have relationships with families; they have relationships with community groups.

But, there's another part of School Based -- you can't just think about counseling. They had a PIC-C program, it's a Parent Infant Child Care Center. In that program -- there's eight in the state; now there's seven because New Brunswick is no longer in -- 20 babies, newborn to 2, children of students, received daycare programming as the students received parental training and care; they went to school; they get services before, after school; and transportation; and parenting training. It's not just the mothers, but also the fathers. It's a remarkable program. Thankfully, the Puerto Rican Action Board in New Brunswick stepped in to take over that program and support New Brunswick School District.

The community rallied to save the in-house program. What the Commissioner and DCF is recommending is to pull those services

away from communities like New Brunswick. It is criminal. And, you can't allow it to happen, and I have very much faith that this Committee is going to fight for it.

You have to do a study of who has support, and who needs it. If you put a hub in WWPN and Mercer, I'm not using it. You're wasting taxpayer dollars. I have in-house support. But, what we could all use is a budgetary allowance so that we can continue to bolster our mental health. We have a 2% cap, but we need to be able to go above that for expanding supports and communities. I would implore you to do an allowance for mental-health services and equip school safety and special ed. -- and transportation, but that's another story -- a different hearing.

But, we need help within the budget, so the local communities can help control this. And, if there is going to be a movement away from School Based, you've got to give them a runway. There is no way -- Senator Cryan is 100% correct -- there is no way they will be ready for July 1. Not with an RFP process, mobilizing 15 hubs, hiring all the counselors.

And, please know, this is a today issue, because as my friend Jeff Moore in Hunterdon Central just said, he already lost one of his counselors to get employment in another place, because as of June 30, they will be unemployed. So School-Based clinicians are already looking for work elsewhere, because they can't afford to be unemployed, and there's so much work for them to have.

So, you know, I will wrap it up there, because there's so much more great commentary. But, please know I'm happy to speak and continue the conversation, because I fully believe in this program.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, David.

Your testimony -- everyone's testimony -- is really building the case, I believe.

And, so, we would like to hear from James Earle, Superintendent of the Trenton Public Schools now.

JAMES EARLE: Good afternoon-- I'm sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: The floor is yours.

MR. EARLE: Thank you.

Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and Joint Committee members; thank you for the invitation, Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, thank you for reaching out to invite me, also.

I just want to thank my colleagues, because almost every comment that I had scripted has already been discussed, and I'm so proud of the work that they have done to be prepared to share how important this is to all of our kids.

I am James Earle, the Superintendent. I reside in Trenton, and our need is great -- no different than anyone else's. We have more, more need than ever. Just the idea of removing this support, this service, I thought it was not true at first, and, so, I realized maybe I need to do my homework, and realized this might be a reality. And, as I said to my colleagues recently, my next move is to consider how I budget to replace it, because there is no replacement in a spoke-and-hub model that makes this work the way it does here.

So, I'm in that process now. So, Mr. Trongone, Rose Grant, David Aderhold, and everyone who has talked about what this means in our schools and those who have come before us to design it and create it, to thank them for sharing information.

We also agree that this is not a modernization or expansion of the current model -- it's an elimination of the current model. We can't reproduce what we are doing here, as well as an elimination of the 91 School Based Youth Services programs that currently exist throughout the state. It pulls services away from schools, and therefore it creates barriers to access that the original model was designed to eliminate. So, now we're going to create -- almost move backwards to recreate those barriers.

Hubs create greater distance, and, again, less access where services are needed. And, I'll talk about real-time service in just a few minutes. And, while there's no evidence of this, but when you speak about equity, we're just looking at terms and the way things are written, how the Commissioner is proposing that NJ4S aligns -- the regional hubs -- aligns with, you know, the New Jersey court vicinages. We just want to make sure there's no evidence and we're not making any assessments here that we're not aligning with courts for any reason other than I guess geographical, because we don't want a new court system created where kids don't follow through and the courts are involved. So, that's just another conversation, likely.

We would also like for DCF to take into account the positive development component of School Based Youth Services. We've all talked about, you know, some of the things that we do in terms of responding to real-time situations. But, there's prevention; lots of prevention. We hope to reduce the need for mental-health services, social and emotional services, and School Based Youth Services often intercedes and they provide programming that makes certain that kids can access some of the skills they need to navigate this world, and, so, it's really important that that's put out

there, and while DCF says they have a designated number of students that our programs service, it far exceeds that number, because we're doing prevention; we're doing real-time support and service. And, so, we want to make sure that it's clear, and I'm sure that it's been stated here and everyone has talked about the positive impact that it's had, that we serve *many* more kids than you actually see on a daily basis.

Specifically, in Trenton, our program is designed to support social and emotional mental health real-time. Real-time matters, because eliminating or reducing real-time access for our students -- and *all* students, for that matter, across the state, those who don't have programs in their schools -- real-time, eliminating or reducing real-time access increases the opportunity for poor decision making, which could have a disastrous impact that you've heard, and we know what that can mean. These supports are provided by familiar adults. That's been talked about on a regular and rotating basis. They are like family, and kids don't open up-- Remember, in these sessions, young people are sharing their deepest most intimate pain, and that can't be duplicated by sharing it with people outside of the environment. So, where they don't have family inside their homes or inside their communities who can support them, School Based Youth Services provide that. So, they're sharing the most intimate details about their life.

And, I heard someone mention earlier that these services would mobilize upon request. Well, Trenton Public Schools, and I'm sure other individuals, that was the idea of it. Trenton Public Schools, and I'm sure other districts, are making our requests for supports right now, and, so, we need them onsite, ready to go, day one, July 1. And, then, tomorrow, and stay moving forward.

Just a quick note about us: We made a commitment to bring several cohorts of students back in district from out-of-district placements, including, like, behavior-disordered students. And we are -- the district is committing our own funds to expand from the program that we already receive to younger students; trying to get to the younger grades earlier and providing supports to students who struggle so that we can reduce some of the things, some of the things that they're going through right now. And, often, School Based Youth Services, that first point of contact for our children, they look for them, and it's that relationship as I said a few minutes ago, you can't duplicate a relationship. It has to be sustained, long term, over time.

And, then, the last thing I'll just say is Trenton, and I'm sure my colleagues feel the same way. I've heard it-- Let us be clear, we're not suggesting that other students in our state don't need these services. We know; we understand the tremendous need across our country, our state, and the communities for social and emotional and mental-health services. We're simply asking that the New Jersey Department of Children and Families sacrifice in other areas to ensure that we don't lose access to what we have.

Thank you for the opportunity to share, and just, I appreciate the time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Superintendent.

I think each of our presenters is building the case more and more for why we need to keep what we have and build on that, rather than have one new program wipe out programs that are currently working.

Next up, I'd like to ask Kristina Nicosia, Superintendent of Highland Park, to speak to us. I know that as superintendents, your schedules are packed, and, so, I am respecting that and asking that -- I'm changing the order a little bit in terms of speakers, so, Kristina, thank you for being with us.

KRISTINA NICOSIA, Ed.D.: Good afternoon, Assemblywoman, and Committee. Thank you so much for having me here.

My name is Dr. Kristina Nicosia, proud Superintendent for the Highland Park Public School District in Middlesex County.

First, I would like to agree with everybody that mental health is a crisis amongst our youth and adults as well. And, today, I would like to speak to you to be the voice of the over 900 students that have access to our School Based Youth Services program called The Teen Center. It's been funded by DCF for over 23 years at just about \$300,000 a year. We have a Board of Education-led program that has three full-time counselors, who are integrated as part of our district, so they are district staff. And, then we use the resources of interns to help supplement the services needed for students.

We offer the same myriad of programs that my colleagues spoke about, so I won't speak about that. But, like I said, as a superintendent, I've witnessed first hand the magnitude of this program, and, today, I would like to share some of those stories. In speaking with a focus group of students on Friday, two themes came out of their remarks: Trust, and access. First, I would like to speak about trust.

When you listen to students talk about school, you'll often hear them give different opinions about their experiences, whether it's with

classes -- ones they like or don't like; teachers -- the ones they like or don't like; but, overwhelmingly, there is not one student that didn't say that our Teen Center was a safe place. That is something every student agrees upon. They talked about experiences from general anxiety to, as my colleague said earlier, heavy life issues.

Coming out as homosexual. A high school sophomore shared their story about coming out as trans in sixth grade. The Teen Center staff helped her navigate changing her name and pronoun at the school level when her parents were incredibly unsupportive. Another student shared that her friend, with the counseling of our Teen Center, was able to get out of a toxic and bad relationship. A 12th-grade student shared that she has been seeing a counselor in the Teen Center since sixth grade, and has helped her get through some really rough times and some incredibly dark places that she did not want me to share.

We have a high level of trust for our addiction counselors, helping students that want to drop out of school, and, as we know, the rise in chronic absenteeism is also a problem. In fact, another student shared that the reason why they actually come to school is because of The Teen Center. So, if not, that they would not come to our school buildings at all. So, I wanted to share that with you.

Students share that no matter what, The Teen Center staff are there for them, and, they wanted me to reiterate, *always*. Another student shared that she was diagnosed with anorexia. She became isolated, and it was difficult to talk about her issues. One day, she just happened to walk in during lunch because our Teen Center is in a discreet location, and she was offered strategies by our counselor to reframe her thinking and overcome her

disease in a matter of a couple of years. She went to that same counselor during lunch once a week. She said this was important to her, as she was able to keep up with her AP coursework and extracurricular activities after school. She said it was convenient to attend therapy during school and during lunch. That the trust was so deep that she told her counselors things that she never told her family or her peers, and she doesn't know where she'd be without them.

Again, the word *safe space* kept coming up over, and over, and over again for this high level of trust. And, that speaks volumes to the relationships that our counselors have developed over the years with our students.

The second theme that came up was access. All students said that having The Teen Center in the building was incredibly critical. They remarked that all parents are not big on mental health, or could even provide transportation or afford to get their children independent, outside help. In fact, the parents remarked that there was a high level of trust because it was in the schools. They trust the schools, therefore, they trust that we're putting the right people in place to offer these services. They also remarked that access was the immediate help; that you don't have to wait to get support; you don't have to wait until after school, that you can -- the young lady suffering from anorexia, she could just go at lunch.

Same thing, another student who is suffering from substance use problems remarked that sometimes he has the urge to use during school, so his teacher allows him to leave class to go to The Teen Center to get that immediate counseling and not have to wait for fear of then using because they feel the need.

One of the things they also shared was that there was no time limit, so they could go and get the counseling and support without the clock ticking and being kicked out if their time was up. Teachers, administration, and staff are very supportive, allowing students to go to The Teen Center when needed. It's strongly supported for students to advocate for themselves, and they do. Our staff and families utilize our Teen Center as well for counseling. Administrators have access to The Teen Center for crisis response and re-entry plan meetings. For example, if there's a death of a student or a student brings a weapon into school, we use restorative practices approach and we provide a whole child approach to bringing those students back in, or providing the necessary crisis response to our families and students in need.

Our Highland Park students were thinking about their peers across the state. They were wondering how 17 hubs were going to service 21 counties; they couldn't figure out the math on that. They also shared that getting access to professional programs and services through the healthcare system is challenging, and that it's hard to get into those programs outside of school. They also remarked that the School-Based Program is convenient, and they also have access to the counselors over the summer and post-graduation, since they build strong relationships.

I want to read a statement from the DCF white paper. They talk about Tier 3 interventions. They said, "Assessment and brief individualized clinical interventions to youth to improve overall health while waiting for connection or referral for further evaluation." So, my argument: Students have to wait for services. This contradicts everything that the current program offers, which is on-demand and in-real-time support.

So, in conclusion, students are upset and heartbroken about the announcement regarding the defunding of our Teen Center. I am the voice of the students that were sitting around the room with tears streaming down their face because they said, that because of The Teen Center, that their lives were saved.

Please continue funding School Based Youth Services programs. The proposed hub-and-spoke NJ4S would depersonalize mental-health services for our students. Even 20% of the students that are serviced here in Highland Park is way too much to get mental-health support. There needs to be real, valid, and reliable data from the DCF and the NJ DOE. And, I charge you with the task of sitting -- coming to my building, sitting with those students, and talking with them. How do you take this away from them? They are humans, and they are children. A hub does not replace the personal connections and safe place that our Teen Center has fostered over the past 23-plus years in Highland Park. It doesn't provide the same level of support.

DCF is ignoring what the students have to say, and their voice matters, and they should be heard.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Dr. Nicosia.

I'm sitting here getting chills, because I hear what you're saying, and I think all of us hear what you're saying. And, be assured that this is not an issue that we're going to let go of.

Thank you very much for your time today.

Next up, Julie Borst, Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey.

JULIE BORS T: Good afternoon; thank you, Assemblywoman, and Senator Cryan, for inviting us all here today.

And, I was hoping I wasn't going to speak after Kristina, because I had heard about those discussions on Friday, and it's hard to talk after that, knowing what those conversations were.

So, let me bring us back to the discussions about how this is being rolled out, and what the communication to the public has been on this. Because I have some very big concerns that I know are shared from a lot of places. You've already heard what the impact or the effect is for students who have these programs. And, I think some of the messaging really has missed the mark about what is actually happening; and there has been spin, shall we say, in how messages have been delivered -- not only to superintendents and the program directors, but also, to myself personally; for the front office; and just, yes, it's just not where it should be. So, let me go through a few things here.

So, first of all, I found out about this the same day that the superintendents found out. And, I got a phone call very early in the morning -- I don't even think the sun was up yet -- from one of my organizers, who happens to sit on the board of one of the School-Based programs. She also is a practitioner, so she works in this space, although not for that particular provider. And, all I could think was, you know, here we go again. We just did this two years ago, why are we back here doing this again?

And, the only thing I can think of, you know, with some hindsight, is that last time they didn't have anything to replace these programs with, or even to begin to talk about the possibility of replacing these programs. And, so, it feels a lot like they were not fans of this particular

program, and let me just tip my hat to you, because I think you're spot on there. And, that they spent the last two years figuring out some way to have an excuse to get rid of these services, not the least of which is how they talk about this.

So, it's talked about only 2% of schools have it. Well, 2% of schools have DCF funding, but, as Dave Aderhold very nicely said, school districts that do not receive DCF funding *do* have mental-health services. It's not that these things don't exist; it is not an equity issue, and thank you, Rosie, for bringing this up very specifically. It's not an equity issue that other school districts don't have this, this is an equity issue because you are pulling away services -- direct services; embedded services; services that have been there for decades, literally; from Black and Latino and economically disadvantaged students. Why would you do that? Why would you even think that that's a good idea?

And, so, the spin here is very, very concerning, because we don't even have a landscape analysis. I can't believe-- I mean, my former life as a business person is sitting here thinking, how do you create a multi-million-dollar, brand new thing, that nobody else has done -- remember, the press release said first in the country, right -- nobody's done this, we don't know whether it's even going to work in the way that they described in their white paper, much less the fact that they're ignoring and not saying out loud the quiet part, which is this is not going to replace the services at the level the students currently have. So, let's just dispel that notion entirely, because that won't happen. And, it's being done in such a way that feels incredibly disingenuous from a public standpoint.

So, I was told that 60% of students don't want services in school. Let me put on my community school hat. And, Ed, as you were describing, community partners, sitting down, figuring out what the community needs are -- actually talking to the community, which they don't appear to have done. Those are all really basic things. There's a reason why community schools work; there's a reason why the Feds are supporting community schools. Because those services *in* schools make the difference. Having to get the services anywhere outside, and not having them in real-time, does not provide the level of support that is required. We need to have this. Yes, we don't have another \$1.2 billion to make sure that everybody has this particular program funded through DCF, but we do have ways to support superintendents like David Aderhold, who is spending over half a million dollars of his own school budget on a program, because this is what his students need.

So, from that community school alone, I will tell you that this is where support is coming from. From the Federal Government, the day that superintendents were told that their services were going away, the House of Representatives -- the U.S. House of Representatives -- passed HR7780, OK, the Mental Health Matters Act. And what's it for? Expanding School-Based mental-health services. A couple days later, last Tuesday, U.S. Department of Education had a webinar. What was it about? School-Based mental-health services. NAMI was the first presenter in that, and they're telling us that four out of five students absolutely trust their schools to provide mental-health services. Their parents trust the schools to provide those services, and that's where they're seeking them; that's where they want them; and that's where the U.S. Department of Education is supporting

them. And, that same day, they released two Federal grants. What are they for? Expanding School-Based -- not School *Linked*, School-*Based* mental-health services.

This is incredibly important, that what is being proposed is completely different than, Number 1, what we know works, and Number 2, who is supporting that. So, one of the things that was also said to me directly -- in a group of superintendents, because a bunch of us met with some folks at the Governor's office about this last week -- was this idea that the School Linked program was somehow going to be good enough to replace this; that there wouldn't be an interruption of service, necessarily. And, Senator Cryan, I have to tell you, your assessment of what the RFP process is in New Jersey is spot on. I don't know how they think they're going to get these things up and running by July 1. You're going to have 15 different providers, potentially; they're going to have to recreate all of these relationships. How is that going to work?

And, my other question, too -- because I don't see how this is seamless in any way, and that certainly is being implied that this would be seamless -- is how is this not an abandonment of those patients? There are students who access services during the summertime. What's going to happen then?

The other thing I want to say is that saying that 60% of students don't want mental-health services in school, and I really wondered where that came from. And, so, a group of superintendents came up with a list of questions, and we had submitted them to the front office. It also went to Commissioner Beyer and also to the Commissioner of the Department of Education. And, one of those questions is, can you please supply us with the

research that you did? We want to see the surveys. We want to see what those results were. We want to see what the summaries were. Who did you send it to? How many surveys went out? What was your response rate?

It took more than a week to get an answer back, and it was wholly incomplete, shall we say. We were provided with a link to the white paper, which, of course, we already had, and we were provided with a link -- which I put in my testimony -- to DCF's website, where there are links to some of the summaries that were done. They had hired a company called The Center for Health Care Strategies to manage this stakeholder group. We were also told that three superintendents had participated in that; there were not three superintendents in that working group. There were three *districts*, but there were no superintendents there.

And, it turns out, and they did share the survey, and I was looking at this thing -- and Suzanne Keller will talk about this a little bit more -- the survey was actually a survey that was sent out by the School-Based programs during COVID, when most of the kids were not even in school, and it was a finger in the wind. "How are you doing? Are you accessing services? Where are you getting them?" Right? And, so, for a student who is not in school, why would they check the "in-person" box? You're not even in the school building. It was never meant to be a scientific instrument. It is not statistically valid. And, yet, this is the story that we're being told -- that 60% of kids don't want services in school, based on that survey, which was nothing more, really, than a poll. It is horrifying to me that at that level of government, anybody is saying that that's OK to use. It's just -- you can hear me, I'm flabbergasted that that was even suggested as some way to do it.

The other thing, too, is that if you take a look at those slides and those summaries, there is reference to another survey which we were not provided with. So, there is a slide that says they have 32 discreet interactions with students. Three of them were in a focus group, there was a second focus group of four, five individual conversations, and then 20 surveys. No idea what the survey is, but I can tell you that a pool of 32 students is not enough to make a multi-million-dollar decision for a brand new system, which, apparently, is only going to work because they say it will and that it's "evidence-based" and therefore will work.

Well, I have news for you. It doesn't work that way in the real world. And, so, I'm not really sure about that. And, I just want to say two more things very quickly. So, you heard from Rosie Grant, and you heard about the two programs in Paterson. Speaking with Senator Gopal, he was told -- I was told *through* him -- that he was told that only 20 of the 91 or 90 programs were good, OK. We don't know what the criteria for that was, and I asked who it was, and Paterson was one of the districts that he named, that he was told, OK. But, you heard from Rosie Grant -- 100% of those students stayed in school and/or graduated from high school, right? I don't know how much more evidence you need that something is working than that.

So, my hope is that this slows down. A lot. We do need stakeholder engagement of the real variety, that actually gets into these places. I encourage you to visit the ones that are in your district. If you don't have one in your legislative district please contact me, and I am happy to connect you to one close to you. Please go see this in action. School Based is where it is, we need to figure out how to support that more, and we need to also figure out whatever that next tier is, because lots of places are triaging

children, there is not a lot of service at that next level when kids need services above school. To me, that's where this focus should be, not on trying to replace something that we know is working with something that I'm afraid is really pie-in-the-sky; it is not going to deliver the same level of service, and that's what you need to take away from this.

Thank you all very much for your time, I really appreciate it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Julie.

We appreciate your insight as well, and the fact that you have a statewide view is very helpful, because I know that you have a wide range of folks who inform you, tell you about things that are going on or not going on.

Let's see, I have four more people that have signed up to speak to us. I am going to ask Suzanne Keller, Supervisor of SOURCE and Freshman Academy at Red Bank Regional High School to speak next, followed by Brett Sabo -- I hope that's the correct pronunciation of your name -- who is a parent in Red Bank, all right.

So, Suzanne, and then Brett.

S U Z A N N E K E L L E R: Thank you, Joint Committee on the Public Schools for inviting me here today.

My name is Suzanne Keller, and I am the Supervisor of The SOURCE and Freshman Academy at Red Bank Regional High School. I have been the Supervisor of The SOURCE for 13 years. The SOURCE has been serving the Red Bank Regional High School community for over 23 years. We are funded through a grant from DCF, the Red Bank Regional Board of Education, and The SOURCE Foundation LF501C3.

Our school of 1,300 students could be considered a microcosm of New Jersey as we are culturally, socioeconomically, and politically diverse. I believe in its current form, NJ4S would have a long-term detrimental effect on the over 35,000 students currently serviced by School Based Youth Services programs.

DCF utilized an informal survey given by the coalition of School-Based directors, known as School Based United. Formed in 2020 as a result of the potential funding cut, its purpose is to help School-Based directors stay connected while promoting the advancement and successful development of the School-Based model. Utilizing this survey, members of the Governor's staff and the DCF Commissioner have been reporting that 60% of students do not want mental-health services in school. In fact, the actual results showed that 67% of students *wanted* services provided by School-Based counselors through a combination of in-person and virtual services. This survey was administered in 2021, during the height of the COVID pandemic. It was never meant to be a statistically valid and reliable research tool to inform decision making.

The State continues to refer to the 35-year-old School Based Youth Services program as not being an evidence-based model. To develop a plan to become evidence-based, School Based United formed an evidence-based committee. They met with assistant professor Dr. Matthew Cuellar from the Department of Social Work and Child Advocacy at Montclair State University. With his assistance, the committee sought to create a foundation of standardization for all School-Based programs, developing a comprehensive method to collect data, produce outcomes, and

inform best practice. This information was formally presented by the committee to DCF, who responded, “No, thank you, not at this time.”

The lack of available clinicians plays a large part in the mental-health crisis, especially males and professionals who are bilingual. NJ4S fails to address the clinician shortage, and who would be servicing these students. As of July 1, NJ4S will be responsible for children’s well-being. I question the feasibility of this timeline. How is it possible to move from RFP in early 2023, to high-functioning hub spokes by September? Relationships, physical spaces, and a volunteer advisory board need to be formed and identified in every single community.

New Jersey is moving in the exact opposite direction of the Federal Government, as evidenced by the passing of HR7780, Mental Health Matters Act; as well as the first \$1 billion in Bipartisan Safer Communities Act funds over the next five years to double the number of School-Based mental-health professionals. NJ4S has no concrete rollout plan in place to provide the multiple services that a School-Based program oversees day-to-day. School-Based programs work because they are designed to meet the needs of a community. They work because of ongoing trusted relationships with the student body, families, guardians, staff, and the greater school community. These trusted relationships are created by being present in the school every day. Building relationships and trust with people takes time; School-Based clinicians are aware of the cultural needs that are present in their diverse and changing community.

SOURCE clinicians go into health classes each marking period to educate students on signs of suicide, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. This can be triggering to some students. Our statistics of students

identified is needing someone to talk to after this prevention education include in '17-'18, 19 students. In '18-'19, 32 students, and in '19-'20, the number rose to 36 students. And in '20-'21, 32 students. Many of these students were sent to the hospital where they were screened for suicidal ideation and released the same day. Each of these students were assigned a SOURCE clinician for continuity of care. Without School-Based clinicians, how would families navigate this often confusing and complicated system?

I don't claim to have all the answers, but I do know the elimination of School-Based programs will lead the New Jersey mental-health system in a deeper crisis with longer waitlists and disproportionate access to care, leaving many marginalized populations of youth without access to free, immediate, and accessible services. How many students will need to suffer or die before services are put into all schools? NJ4S will stop the societal normalization of mental-health services, because it will no longer be part of the school community. Students will be forced into a one-size-fits-all impersonal system of hubs and spokes with services delivered on off-campus sites; to phone call referrals and virtual appointments. Children are already struggling to communicate.

I was asked to testify because I am in it, as they say: I walk this walk every day, and I am proud of the role The SOURCE plays in the advancement of mental health; collaborating with our greater community, educating, and supporting families, caregivers, and students; but, most importantly, saving lives. I am certain you recognize the impact of your decisions on 1.4 million children. Mental health is a vital component to learning, to education, to producing a whole and complete person.

Please, let your legacy be one of ending the stigma of mental health by providing access to mental-health services in all schools.

I thank you for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very, very much, Suzanne.

We have -- is Brett Sah-bow, or say-bow, a parent--

B R E T T S A B O: Say-bow.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Say-bow, yes.

Would you like to speak?

MS. SABO: Sure.

Thank you so much for letting me give testimony, and I want to thank all the elected officials and the educators and the administrators on this call. It's been such an education for me today, and I'm sure there would be so many more parents echoing what I'm feeling right now, which is super fired up about this issue.

As you said, my name is Brett Sabo. My son is a junior at Red Bank Regional, and like all the students in his class, he spent his freshman year in this kitchen on a Zoom call like this, so, when sophomore year started, being in a new environment and suddenly around so many people was stressor upon stressor. Fortunately, he had the open doors of The SOURCE, and he could come in, and he could hang out with the therapy dog, and often, he would stay and talk to one of the clinicians, just to check in and eventually that turned into him having regular meetings with one of the clinicians who we would keep in touch with as well. So, it was a really benefit for our whole family unit.

Mental healthcare for teens -- I'm not telling you guys anything you don't know, of course, but it's not just sitting across at a table and asking them about their feelings. Ideally, big picture, it's a support system where students have real-time access and a free, ongoing relationship with these mental-health professionals. It's that open door; it's that therapy dog that becomes an unofficial mascot for the school; it's trips to local theaters; and programs where boys can spend time together and learn how to be young men. It's personal; it's specific; and it's consistent, and, of course, all schools deserve something like The SOURCE, and I know everyone knows that, but I feel like while that hub-and-spoke model is only beginning, that SBYSes need to stay in place. They have that institutional knowledge that The SOURCE brings, and that can help inform this new model.

Children experience the most anxiety during the school day, and The SOURCE gives them free access in the building -- I feel like that is so important and, like we just heard, The SOURCE has been there for 23 years, and it is embedded in the fabric of the school and in the community. And, this is a community that is very diverse racially and economically and it would leave a very dangerous hole in that fabric, taking it away right now. (indiscernible) the kids have lost so much of their high school experience already to the pandemic, and giving them the consistency in this uncertain time I think is really important and sorely needed.

So, thank you very much for hearing me.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much for bringing a parent voice to this conversation. I think that's really important.

So, I thank you for your time.

We have two other speakers: We have Melda Grant, who is the Coordinator of the Trenton School Based Youth Service Program, Trenton Public Schools, and you'll be followed by Maria Rebelo, Program Director at Harrison High School.

Melda.

MELDA GRANT, Ed.S.: Yes, thank you so much for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

MS. GRANT: Again, my name is Melda Grant, and I am the coordinator for the School Based Youth Services Program at Trenton Central High School. I am a graduate of Trenton Central High School, and a lifelong resident of the city of Trenton.

So, in addition to what a lot of my colleagues and supporters have already said, I just want to point out that when the Commissioner was on, she mentioned best practices that have been shared from other states. The University of Maryland School of Medicine's National Center for School Mental Health hosts an annual conference of national practitioners who participate in this conference annually, and I am one of those practitioners. I have conversations daily with practitioners all over the country, and this center supports services in school. All of the models that are being discussed at national levels support models in school -- not in the community. NAMI also supports services in school.

The other thing that I want to point out is that the Commissioner's proposal for this model suggests that services need to be offered to all schools, grades K through 12, and all school districts -- yet she only shared statistics today about Black students. So, School Based Youth Services programs are in urban, rural, and suburban districts. There are Black

students in urban, suburban, and rural districts. Trenton, as you know, is an urban district, so I can only really speak for what I see here in Trenton.

So, one of the spokes of the hub that the Commissioner mentioned is libraries. There are three libraries in Trenton. So, if she was really familiar with all of New Jersey and what is available to a lot of our students, libraries, obviously, for safety reasons and for access and availability, is not one of the locations that would be a successful hub -- or spoke, rather -- for our students.

Another thing that I want to bring up is that the services will be provided in homes. In urban districts, most schools and households - - I mean most students are from households that rent. They rent homes; they rent apartments; housing projects. A lot of our students are transient; living with friends; living with family members; living in hotels and motels. So, a big concern that I would have is how confidentiality would be ensured in those types of situations.

So, I also just want to talk a little bit about how School-Based programs came into existence. Yes, there are 91 School-Based programs throughout the State of New Jersey, but we didn't just pop up. We had to respond to RFPs that were either issued by the Department of Human Services or the Department of Children and Families, where we each had to show a need in our community. And, those needs still exist in each one of our communities. I can give you an example: Just today, this morning, I was walking down the hall, and a student that I knew was coming out of the bathroom crying. I was able to bring this student back to our office. This student was able to process his emotions, and he was able to return to class because the service is here in the school.

This past Monday, a student presented with suicidal thoughts. He had a plan, but he didn't act on his thoughts. He was able, after class, to share his thoughts with his teacher, and his teacher and the student both had immediate access to our services. Because the student felt safe in this place, he ended up sharing years of trauma that had never been disclosed. So, once we met with this student, we were able to refer him to crisis and to proper interventions, but the other piece is that I've had a conversation with this student's mother every day this week. And, the connections that we make with parents and the engagement that we have with parents and families is second to none.

And, I would also add that when we establish relationships with students and families, it helps when we need to refer them out to other services because if they trust us, they will trust the referral source that we send them to. They know that Ms. Melda or any of the staff on our School-Based staff -- or another other School-Based staff program -- is not going to send them out to an entity that cannot be trusted. So, because they trust us, they trust other services.

The other piece that I want to bring up -- and I think Mr. Earle mentioned this -- is that there is a positive youth-development component as a part of the School-Based model. So, the School-Based program is a program; these aren't individual people, but it's a program, so the positive youth-development component provides skills to students that help to prevent the referral for mental-health services. So, I just wanted to bring that piece up as well.

And, then the last point that I want to make is I'm skeptical about the alignment of the hub locations with our court system, or

our vicinages. I don't know what the justification is to line the hubs up with those particular court systems, but it can give the implication that the behaviors and actions of our children may be criminalized as opposed to realizing that it's trauma or we don't want to send students to the court system. We want to keep them away from the systems, and we want to keep them in schools where their trauma and some of their other issues can be addressed.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, that's a really good point. That's one that I have questions about as well.

Thank you very much for your testimony. You added a great deal to the discussion that we've been having already.

Last but not least is Maria Rebelo, Program Director of Harrison High School.

And, then, for those of you who can stay on, we'll have some -- we have another 15 minutes of airtime so that we can have a further discussion and, certainly, we're going to need follow up.

All right, Maria.

MARIA REBELO: Good afternoon. My name is Maria Rebelo, I am the Program Director of the School Based Program at Harrison High School in Hudson County. I, too, am a graduate of Harrison High School, and this is a position that I have proudly held for the last 22 years of my career.

First, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today in regards to the impact dismantling the School-Based programs will have on my immediate community, but as well as the rest of the State of New Jersey.

Historically, our program enrolls 80-90% of the student population at Harrison High School. Approximately 50-55% percent of our students participate in our program in some capacity. Our staff, composed of three bilingual social workers, provide services to up to 400 students in our building per calendar year. We are the only Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking mental-health counselors in our school, where 20% of the student population is English language learners, and 80% of our students come from Spanish-speaking homes.

I believe we are all familiar with the core services School Based provides to students throughout the State of New Jersey. It is our daily consistent presence in the schools, providing a variety of services, that enables us to develop trusting relationships with students. These relationships give our students the strength to seek services when they are dealing with anxiety; suicidal ideation; depression; abandonment; peer relationships; and other adolescent and family struggles.

School Based at Harrison High is embedded in the daily lives of our students, providing them with social and emotional experiences through prevention workshops; socialization activities; academic support; and exposure to cultural experiences they may not otherwise experience. The strength of the School-Based Program is the immediate access to the services and the ability to develop programming based on the unique needs of our communities. For my staff, this has included providing emotional support at funerals to students struggling with the traumatic death of family members, peers, and teachers. It involves accompanying a traumatized student to a church and providing a walk-through of what to expect during the funeral to minimize the trauma. It has also involved sitting with a group of students in

a palliative care unit as their friend takes their last breath. It is the knock on the door before the school day starts and having a student hand me a bottle of empty prescription medication to say, “I did this; I swallowed the pills on the way to school; I’m scared; I didn’t mean to do it,” and then spending the rest of the day with a police officer from Harrison in the emergency room providing assistance to the parent, holding their infant, and allowing them to feel safe enough to speak to the emergency room staff.

Sorry, I lost my place.

These are the services that my dedicated staff has provided to my community that could never be quantified in a survey or any test scores. It is evident the School-Based program allows mental-health professionals to interact with students in their natural environment, allowing systemic change to occur. As a mental-health professional in private practice for almost 25 years, I can attest to the fact that this is not the experience of my typical 45-minute session in my private office.

In a time of constant uncertainty in the lives of our students, School-Based staff are the constant, trusting adults which enables students to seek services free of judgment. For our students, School Based is the friend who sticks around after the funerals and after the traumatic events and continued to support you during times of need and when the rest of the world goes quiet. Since coming back to in-person learning, School Based at Harrison High has added to our many services by developing a student-mentoring program. Students are trained as leaders in our community. Every ninth-grade student is assigned a peer mentor to help facilitate a positive school climate.

In addition, our mentors are contributing to the community of Harrison through various community activities. Our summer program provides a safe environment for the incoming ninth graders to begin transitioning to high school, even before they step into the doors of our building in September. In addition, these are the students who have spent close to 18 months in their bedrooms during the pandemic. School Based provides them with the opportunity to develop desperately needed social skills, recreational activities, and daily meals.

As a mental-health professional, I am keenly aware of the need for increased mental-health services in our communities. However, the expansion of services should not come at the expense of eliminating School Based from communities who have historically demonstrated a need for specialized programming. Dismantling the program will abandon the students, families, teachers, and the communities that have come to depend on the service School Based provides. My staff and I have dedicated the majority of our professional careers to School Based because we truly believe in the model and its efficacy in working with our students.

Given the current state of the social service labor in the State of New Jersey, I am extremely concerned about the ability to hire, train, and retain mental-health professionals to provide the consistent level of service our students desperately need. I believe the best advocacy of why the program should remain intact is what our students have to say. So, in closing, I would like to share some of the heartfelt comments written by some of our students.

“I truly believe I made it and graduated high school because School Based was there for me. Coming to Harrison -- before coming

to Harrison High, I was in a very dark place. School Based showed me I was not alone.” This statement was written by a student on behalf of her friend, who did not survive her battle with cancer. School Based was her place to share her fears of dying. They helped her navigate the hardest thing we could ever ask of a young person -- to navigate the realities of her own mortality. “I know I am a survivor because of them. I know my friend survived those last two painful years without falling into complete hopelessness because of this program. Since coming to Harrison High, School Based has been nothing but helpful, supportive, and many more amazing things. School Based is my safe place. Here is where I consider home. They saved my life. If it wasn’t for them, I do not think I would be alive today breathing, living, and being happy.”

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Maria.

I think hearing a student’s voice is especially important for all of us, and it brings home why we are so involved with this program and the plans. I think we all agree that what we need is more, but, we need to explore the best way to expand programming for more of our students and not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, right?

A couple of our legislators would like to weigh in. I’m going to recognize Assemblywoman Annette Chaparro, and then Senator Cryan, if you would like to wrap this up. I see also Assemblywoman Verlina Jackson on the page, as well as Angela McKnight -- Assemblywoman McKnight.

So, I’m going to start -- let’s have a discussion. And, we’ll begin with Annette.

Go ahead.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ANNETTE CHAPARRO: Thank you, Assemblywoman, and Senator Cryan.

I have to tell you, I think I lied to you when I said I'd do it in 30 seconds. Because I am just so angry, emotional -- I have notes everywhere, numbers just don't add up. I have too many of, how many kids we're servicing, the numbers keep changing, the amount of schools keep changing, and that alone tells me we are on the wrong track.

I am a Latina. I grew up in the housing authority. I know what food insecurity is; and I wouldn't call it food insecurity back then, I just called it the plain and simple "starvation." Insecurity is just a pretty way of making it nicer, just like I think this transition is also trying to just paint a pretty picture like it's going to work.

Let me just say, it was mentioned -- trust and access for our students at school. Stability is also another word, and what's going -- what this is going to create is that these students are eventually going to be angry at people at their school. They're going to say, "You let me down," because that's all they know. They trust the school and the staff and the program. You're ripping it from them. You can call an 800 number, you can do whatever you want -- it's not going to work, and that infuriates me to hear that you think it can possibly work.

We've been here too many times on different topics, where we implement something and, guess what, there's a glitch in the system, and things don't work; we've got to go back to it. We don't have time to just take from our kids that are vulnerable, especially Latino and Black kids that are very vulnerable, and it takes a while for them to trust, to then have that

ripped from them and tell them to call an 800 number. And, we used to have -- it's not a joke -- but me and my friend used to say this back in the day, when she actually went through this. When she was a teenager, she called an 800 line for suicide and they said, "Suicide hotline, please hold." Excuse me?

So, this is telling me that, you know, COVID -- when they were trying to do away with it then, then COVID happened, and then *everybody's* mental state was in jeopardy. So, now, we're going to say, "Oh, yeah, there is a big need. So, let's just take away from programs that are working and put it into something else. And, we're going to just say, "You know, the number 2,400 in schools versus 90, 91, whatever number you want to put -- sounds like, 'well, it's a no brainer, we want 2,400 schools to have it.' But that's not accurate. That's just not accurate. And, it infuriates me. There's not enough money for that; there just isn't enough money. There's \$300,000 for a program to run, and you're trying to do for 2,400? You need \$720 million, then, to make it work so they're not gyped.

And, it's not-- What are we going to say to the families? Every family is going through something, and the kids need this desperately. Because this just doesn't stop at the school; once they get out of the school, the (indiscernible) there. I am a housing authority project. I know that if the school fed me and took care of me (indiscernible) I would appreciate it, but I had to walk home; it's not safe there. And, if we're going to talk about home visits -- how many of those home visits are going to be afraid to go into the housing authority to visit someone? How often is that going to happen? We already know that doesn't happen for kids in the foster system, right? That's how they wind up there.

So, there's so many things -- and I keep going, and going -
- but I am furious. I am furious that it's just-- Let's just talk about this. I'm
all for all kids should have it, but we already talked about this before this
program. We talked about mental health. We talked about a shortage for
services -- mental-health services, a shortage. People with great insurance are
waiting six months to see someone.

So, what are we doing? Our kids cannot do this. So, I'm
going to wrap it up because I'm so emotional and so angry and I don't want
to drop an f-bomb or anything like that, but, I'm not-- I'm all for a pilot,
that's all I'm going to say. I'm all for a pilot, but leave this alone; don't touch
it.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I think that's a good way
to sum it up. Leave it alone until we have something really in place and well
thought out.

Senator O'Scanlon is on, I believe.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Hi, Assemblywoman, how are
you? Sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Good; that's all right.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Thanks for giving me an
opportunity to comment.

I couldn't really do a better job than the Assemblywoman
who just spoke. And, I'll try not to drop an f-bomb as well. Although, look,
let's call this as it is: It's just another outrageous overreach and extraordinary
example of lack of communication that the administration, unfortunately,
has become known for.

We didn't hear from one stakeholder today who said that they thought this was a good idea. We didn't hear from one who thought that maybe it was sort of a good idea. Every single stakeholder from across the socioeconomic spectrum -- I'm sure from across political spectrums -- said it's a horrific idea. Several said that children's lives actually might be at stake here, especially that last emotional input that we heard.

It's just -- it's another administration total disaster of communication, never mind of policy. We need to band together, the Legislature, and I really appreciate you, Assemblywoman, and Senator Cryan, on the topic of today's hearing, for this timely (technical interference) we need to band together and oppose this and get the administration to back off. I've heard-- I have two of these programs in my district, and you heard from Red Bank Regional folks, Keansburg as well; we've spoken to Keansburg, same opinion, that this is going to be a disaster for these kids.

And, I have to ask -- someone had mentioned it earlier -- that it's been requested of the administration that we get a list of the stakeholders they claim to have spoken to; a list of the surveys; a list of the questions; a list of their responses. Where is all that? That should have been published when they announced this so people could talk to these folks and could read these materials. It hasn't been. That is very troubling to me.

Also, I have to say, if Julie Borst was not one of the stakeholders that was in the middle of this working with the administration, then who the hell was? There is no more appropriate person to have been there. That is absolutely terrifying. She raised a batch of issues that I won't repeat. Lastly, I do want to say that my daughter gave me permission to publicly state that she utilized The SOURCE -- which is what the program is

called at Red Bank Regional -- and it was invaluable to her throughout her-- She's now a senior in high school. Dealing with pandemic issues, dealing with, you know, the things our young people are going through today, exponentially more than maybe we did because of the pandemic and the challenges that they're facing.

So, I very much appreciate this. I am outraged that once again-- There should never be something like this that's a bomb like this. It just shouldn't happen; I don't understand. And, for the Commissioner to be on and then leave -- I'm not sure what could be a higher priority than this issue right now. I'm not sure what could have been a higher priority than sitting and listening to what we heard today that couldn't have been rescheduled. So, I'm outraged at that, too.

So, I'll stop right there, but know that me, my office, my running mates -- I know Assemblywoman Flynn is on as well -- we stand ready to work in a bipartisan way to stop this from happening, certainly to stop it from happening at the beginning of the next school year.

So, again, thank you for the opportunity to comment and for doing this hearing altogether.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator, I appreciate that.

I would like to hear from Assemblywoman McKnight, followed by Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, and Assemblywoman Flynn and Senator Burgess.

OK, so we'll go to Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

I am just going to be short. I am outraged as well about all of this that is happening. And, I want to thank my budget counterpart, Assemblywoman Chaparro. We sit on budget; we've heard these things; we brought this up; and yet again, we're back here.

So, I think we have said loud and clear that we want to send a message back to the Commissioner and back to Governor Murphy's office that this is a no-go for the State of New Jersey. No, no, no. Loud and clear.

We heard from parents, administrators, superintendents, principals, and people that actually work with our children every single day. The inequities that-- It's just not right. Because now you're putting kids that are in need against one another. That's just not fair to our children. They all have the services at their school, all mental-health services are provided, but, to be able to look at this from a budgetary standpoint, I think there is more slick stuff that's trying to happen, moving it into discretionary funds versus from where (technical interference)

So, let's take the emotion out of it, and let's look at this budgetarily-wise, and, then, let's have this conversation. But, I'm done with the (technical interference), I'm done with this.

Thank you very much, Chairwoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK, I hear you loud and clear, Assemblywoman.

Let's see, who did I say next. Assemblywoman McKnight, are you still on?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN ANGELA V. McKNIGHT: Yes, I am here.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Add something new, because we're running out of time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN McKNIGHT: OK, no problem.

I agree with everyone, what they have said. I just want to -- I have two points.

One is, I was taken aback by the Commissioner only singling out Black children in reference to what the needs are, because all -- there are so many children who need assistance.

And, then, Number 2, I sit on a few community school boards here in Jersey City, and our motto is to bring services to the school. And, this new model is, like, to bring services outside the school, and more and more money is being put into community service schools. So, there's a total disconnect with what's happening, and, I agree, this is a no for me.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

Assemblywoman Flynn.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Thank you, Assemblywoman; thank you Chair, Vice-Chair, for putting this together.

I have to share in the stakeholders' response as well, at how surprised I was to hear about this. When I saw this in my inbox, I was like, "Did I miss something? Were we redoing all mental-health programs? Did I miss a memo along the way, because only--" At this time last year, I was a school board president, and pretty engaged on this issue from a budgetary point of view.

So, I was shocked. I sent out the information seeking comments to everyone in my district, and I have to tell you, everyone is very

annoyed that they had no idea. I haven't spoken to a person yet who had an idea that we were even going down this road.

I want to give you a perspective as a school board member. After years and years of putting tons of money towards mental-health needs, and every time we would hire someone -- we had a partnership with Rutgers Behavioral Health to get them in our buildings. We put them in the high school because we thought that's where they would probably be most needed. Guess what? We had that person going to our 4-5-6 building on a daily basis, which was frightening. And, this is pre-pandemic. So, to the fact that we're trying to dismantle a mental-health program for School-Based services post-pandemic, there is no public policy in which that makes sense.

So, I am a hard no on this. In whatever way, shape, or form I can help, I can do it. I mean, we have SOURCE. I've had a number of my friends and colleagues, I have teenaged daughters, all my friends and colleagues -- they know about this; they're surprised; they're upset. Again, can't find someone who is in favor of this, except for the Commissioner who took maybe five minutes of her time today to speak with us.

So, I also have a warning to everyone: Do not piss off the parents. And, right now, you've pissed off a lot of parents. So, I think it's great we're working in this way, in a bipartisan way.

And, I think, finally, the final message that we should give to DCF is to instead focus on replicating programs like SOURCE, like The Link, in all those other schools, because that number is also frightening -- that there's that many school districts in this state that *don't* have School Based Youth Mental Health Services in place. That's where the focus needs to be. Do that, and you'll have achieved your purpose.

And, that's that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

Senator Thompson, would you like to weigh in next? And, followed by Sol Heckelman.

Senator Thompson, are you on? (no response)

OK, perhaps he left us. Sol, would you like to weigh in? And, you'll be followed by, I believe, Assemblywoman Matsikoudis. And, if you want to speak, put your hand up so that I can see it.

Thank you.

S O L H E C K E L M A N, Ph.D.: OK, thank you very much.

I am both a licensed psychologist and a school psychologist, so I have both perspectives. And, in fact--

SENATOR THOMPSON: Anyway, Senator, a text that I have to--

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: No, no, you're unmuted--

MR. HECKELMAN: Oh, go ahead, you want to go ahead, Senator?

SENATOR THOMPSON: (indiscernible)
Assemblywoman--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, go ahead, Senator.

Senator Thompson, are you there? Senator?

SENATOR THOMPSON: I'm muted. Hello.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK, here you are, all right.

SENATOR THOMPSON: Yeah, (indiscernible) they muted me. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK, wasn't me.

SENATOR THOMPSON: I think a case was made very well, today, that we do need to maintain the current programs that we have in place now.

And, if an alternative wants to be offered, it can be put out there. But, it appears that the program in place is doing a great job and, if the schools want to keep it, they should be permitted to do so.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you. I agree.

SENATOR THOMPSON: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

I think we're all in agreement here, which is unusual, but welcome.

All right, Sol, would you like to pick up where you left off?

DR. HECKELMAN: I can do that.

As I was saying, I am both a licensed psychologist and a school psychologist. I'm a past president of the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists. I'm the editor of their newsletter, and, God help me, I'm also the finance chair.

So, I'm retired now, but I've been around for a long time, and still maintain my interest in education and mental-health issues. It was very gratifying to hear what was said.

I have almost nothing to add -- I said almost. So, I won't repeat anything that was said, but another little perspective I'd like to introduce. By the way, it's heartening to see people that have been colleagues, or almost colleagues, in my past. Dave Aderhold, we both served on the school boards project with developing the mental-health resource manual. I worked as coordinator of special ed. in Pemberton Township before Tony was

there -- maybe I paved the way for him. I've been in New Brunswick; I'm on the Early Childhood Council; and I'm also very thankful to finally meet the godfather of the School-Based program. I was Director in the Long Branch schools, Director of Pupil Personnel Services when it was initiated, so we had one of the first six programs in the state. And I couldn't believe when I first heard that it was not funded by the Department of Ed., but it was funded by another department. What a wonderful example of collaboration, and that's the way it was -- of course, until what's happening now.

What I want to add is the idea that in-school services are the most efficient and the most productive. As a clinical psychologist, I've worked outside the schools, and I used to think if you're a psychologist any place you just do your thing and you work with the kids and you work with the adults -- it ain't so. When you're in the schools, it's not just the kid himself or herself, where we're kind of stuck with this old medical model of the kid carries a disease around with him.

And, what we need to realize is it's a public-health issue. And, so, the dynamics of the community within the school is extremely important, and kids function very much not only on their own, but as reflective of their community within the school, that's where they are most of the day, so that a staff member in the school -- whether it's a social worker, a counselor, a psychologist, whomever -- are very aware of the dynamics between the staff, the kids, the kids themselves, what's going on. And, very often, that's a crucial part of supporting the child and of helping him or her to get a handle on what's going on.

When you're outside the schools, you just don't know that. You may have heard a little bit about that, but you don't know that. It's not

part of your gut. So, a crucial part of any kind of services is from the staff who's the schools and working with that.

Another aspect I want to touch on, as this is very much related to child study team staff working not just with kids who may need special ed., but with the entire spectrum of kids in general. That's really-- The preventive and early identification is extremely important, and we neglect that. We often look at a kid who's got a very serious problem which needs to be addressed, but we forget that most of the kids don't have a problem quite as serious, but they may go down that road if they're not helped before that. And, so, they're suddenly -- which you're probably very aware of -- is what's called the multi-tiered system of services, which tries to address -- not only child study but other staff in the schools -- tries to address issues that come up in a minor way in the beginning, and to head off what might be a much more serious issue later on.

And, so, when you put these things together, I think there's no alternative but to work with staff within the schools and to ramp up those kinds of services and that kind of coordination.

That's it. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN McKNIGHT: You're muted.

MS. BORST: Assemblywoman, you're muted.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MATSIKOUDIS: Oh, hi, is that me?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Sorry, sorry.

I was just thanking Sol for adding his lifetime of experience to the conversation.

I would like to recognize Assemblywoman Matsikoudis, followed by Senator Burgess to wrap up.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MATSIKLOUDIS: Thank you so much.

I will be brief. I agree with everything that I am hearing today, also. I am, additionally, outraged by a lot of this.

And, I feel like that's-- The hearing today, it identified some of the key issues that have been poorly communicated by our Executive branch, in that there is *clear* need for mental-health services in schools. We need to support our kids, and we can't rely on fast-track policies to provide positive results.

So, you know, in short, I look forward to supporting solutions that are going to keep the SBYS in place.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Assemblywoman, I appreciate it.

Senator.

SENATOR BURGESS: Hi.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I think you get the last word here.

SENATOR BURGESS: Thank you, I'll try to be brief as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Welcome to Trenton.
(laughter)

SENATOR BURGESS: Thank you, thank you.

And, I'm very happy to be here. I am in a blessed situation, because, as always, my passion is to help others and although this is my first

meeting and my first time being introduced to this subject, I must say it is very important, and I agree with what everyone has basically had dialogue upon this afternoon.

I am a firm believer in if it's not broke, don't fix it. These programs seem to have been catered to each one's community, and they're saving lives. They're working, so why change it?

So, as I learn more information upon this, you know, I hope that you keep me a part of this Committee so that we can all work together to come up with a solution that's going to help all of us.

Again, thank you, and I appreciate -- I just appreciate what everyone is doing here and how they're expressing themselves, because it really showed the love and caring that everyone has on this call today.

So, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

And, you have big shoes to fill, because this Committee was Co-Chaired by Senator Rice. So, it's fitting that you sit in his seat.

SENATOR BURGESS: Well, thank you. And, as I always say, I'm not trying to fill his shoes, but I'm trying to create my own to do just as good as him and with everybody; I know progress is going to happen.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you. Thank you, Senator.

Did I miss anyone? (no response)

OK. If not, I want to thank everyone who has been on this call today, everyone who has testified, and all of the legislators who have listened very carefully.

We will be back to you on follow up, because this is something that is of utmost urgency that we address. So, we will be certainly talking to the administration as well as to the Commissioner in terms of next steps.

Thank you, everyone.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)