

Regular Educator Training is Needed to Help Prevent Youth Suicide

Testimony to the House Public Education Committee in Support of HB 1144 by Rep. Ramos

Experts in suicide prevention recommend annual suicide prevention training for educators and other school personnel who regularly interact with students.¹ Texas currently requires schools to provide educators with suicide prevention training during new employee orientation, however, follow-up training is not required in law or rule.² As suicide risk among Texas youth is on the rise, it is more critical than ever for educators to acquire and maintain the knowledge and skills needed to recognize suicide risk factors and warning signs in students and clearly understand their schools' response procedures, referral protocols, and resources to prevent and address youth suicide.

HB 1144 by Rep. Ramos would help protect students from suicide risk by ensuring educators not only receive training on suicide prevention during their new employee orientation, but that school districts and open-enrollment charter schools also provide educators with suicide prevention training at least once every two years so that educators can remain ready, confident, and equipped to assist students when needed.

Youth suicide was a significant and growing concern before the pandemic. COVID-19 created a “perfect storm” of stressors that elevates suicide risk among youth even more.

COVID-19 has created and exacerbated challenges for children throughout Texas. Millions of Texas families are facing food insecurity, housing challenges, loss of health coverage, and poverty due to job loss and lower incomes. Families, teachers, and mental health providers are reporting increases in signs of distress, anxiety, grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide among students.³ New research by the American Academy of Pediatrics

¹ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists & The Trevor Project (2019). Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources (2nd ed.). New York: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.:

² Texas Education Code Sec. 21.451(d) requires districts and open-enrollment charter schools to provide suicide prevention training to existing educators on a schedule adopted by the agency by rule and annually as part of new employee orientation for educators; Texas Administrative Code Title 19 Sec.153.1013 requires districts to have provided training to existing educators by Sept. 2016 and to new educators as a part of new employee orientation

³ Dec. 22, 2020 Texas Tribune article [As pandemic grinds on, Texas students increasingly feel alone and scared, and some are thinking about suicide.](#)

confirms what families and mental health providers were witnessing — increased rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among 11- to 21-year-olds in 2020, including youth and young adults in Texas.⁴

Suicide-related trends may be worsening, but they are not new. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission released a report on Suicide and Suicide Prevention in Texas in May 2020 that indicates that suicide attempts and deaths among Texas youth were becoming alarmingly more common prior to the pandemic.⁵

- Over the past two decades, Texas’ suicide attempt rate for high school students increased by 37 percent. The U.S. rate has decreased in the same time frame. **In 2017, one in eight high school students in Texas reported a recent suicide attempt** — a rate 66 percent higher than the national rate that same year.
- Calls to the Texas Poison Control Center for suspected suicide attempts in teens increased by 39 percent since 2004.
- The rate of suicide deaths for individuals aged 15-24 increased by 41 percent since the early 2000s (from 10.7 deaths per 100,000 population to 15.1 deaths per 100,000 population).
- The suicide rate for children ages 5-14 is extremely low but it has increased by 30 percent (from 1.0 deaths per 100,000 population to 1.3 deaths per 100,000 population).
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 10 to 17 years in Texas.

Educators have an important role to play in preventing youth suicide.

Research indicates teachers believe they have a role to play in preventing youth suicide, but a lack of training and worries about making a situation worse often prevents them from assisting students.⁶ The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention recommends at least one hour every year for all school staff on suicide prevention to help educators acquire the necessary skills and confidence to intervene with youth at risk, including knowing district policies and protocols related to suicide.⁷ More than 30 states require educators to be trained in suicide.⁸

- **At least 13 states require annual training:** Including Alaska, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Tennessee
- **At least eight states require training every 2-5 years:** Including Arizona, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Wyoming.

⁴ Suicide Ideation and Attempts in a Pediatric Emergency Department Before and During COVID-19. (2021) Pediatrics March 2021, 147 (3)

⁵ In compliance with House Bill (H.B.) 3980, 86th Legislature. <https://hhs.texas.gov/file/134236/download?token=ytKZ4eMR>

⁶ Hatton V., Health M.A., Gibb G.S., Coyne S., Hudnall G., Bledsoe C. Secondary teachers’ perceptions of their role in suicide prevention and intervention. School Ment. Health. 2017;9:97–116.

⁷ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists & The Trevor Project (2019). Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources (2nd ed.). New York: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.:

⁸ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2020). State Laws: Suicide Prevention in Schools (K-12). <https://www.datocms-assets.com/12810/1602535612-k-12-schools-issue-brief-10-12-20.pdf>