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Safe and Supportive Schools for All Students

By Senator Katherine Clark

It seems like a simple enough idea: if all children are to learn and achieve to their full potential, they need a safe and supportive school environment. But ensuring such an environment for all students is no easy feat. Indeed, school districts often struggle with how to implement, in a comprehensive and consistent way, a whole range of important behavioral health initiatives, including drop-out and truancy prevention programs, anti-bullying training, trauma sensitivity programs, and support for social and emotional development.

This is a lot to ask of our teachers but they embrace it, as they do with every aspect of learning. They do so because they know better than anyone that educating a child means helping him or her to grow and thrive academically, physically, socially and emotionally. Our teachers and administrators also know that today too many children face far too much exposure to stress at home, trauma and violence.

As the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has concluded, "Too many students with behavioral health challenges are doing poorly in school. Some are missing school, failing tests, falling behind, and eventually dropping out. Others experience punitive responses and are suspended or expelled in record numbers. Research tells us that behavioral health is intricately connected to academic, social, and emotional success at school."

We know that children cannot effectively learn if they are feeling threatened or scared or if underlying behavioral or emotional challenges go unacknowledged or unaddressed. Our schools deserve our help in addressing this challenge.

To assist districts in developing and implementing a more effective, inclusive approach to safe and supportive school environments, I have introduced legislation to help schools integrate services and align all the programs that promote students' behavioral health and improve education outcomes.

An Act relative to safe and supportive schools would require all schools, by 2016, to develop action plans for creating positive learning environments using the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Assessment Tool, provided by the Massachusetts DESE. This behavioral health framework already exists, and in fact is being utilized successfully in some areas, including in the Reading Public School District.

These tools are designed to help school districts organize, integrate and sustain efforts to create safe and supportive environments, while also giving them the ability to assess their current strengths and unique challenges.

In addition, the bill provides support for school districts to implement this framework, including trainings and technical assistance, on-going recommendations from a commission of experts, and a grant program for schools that serve as models for implementation.

This bill has received wide-spread endorsement from teachers, parents, school psychologists, school nurses, physicians, children's health advocates, and experts in the field of child development.

The bottom line is this: more supportive school environments will help all students learn and achieve. That's something we all can support.

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