



April 21, 2020

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
State Capitol, 1st Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Request for \$20 Million in Emergency Funding for Behavioral Health Support for Students, Teachers and School Staff

Dear Governor Newsom:

Thank you for the work that you and your administration have been doing to help California confront the COVID-19 pandemic. We are writing today to urge you to dedicate \$20 million of the funding allocated by the Legislature through SB 89 (Chapter 2, Statutes of 2020) to improving access to behavioral health services for students, teachers, and other school staff during this pandemic and in the future. We must build the infrastructure now to support students' and staff's current and future behavioral health needs under the intense and unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19.

As you have demonstrably recognized, this pandemic is having a serious mental health impact on Californians. We appreciate the inclusion of emotional support and well-being resources by you and the Surgeon General on the state's public COVID-19 website. Before this pandemic started, California was in the midst of a youth mental health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders and school closures are adding additional stress and potentially trauma, grief, and loss on children and school staff. This stress is different depending on the child's situation, whether it be worrying about a family member in a vulnerable population or a loved one in an essential service, struggling without a routine or peer groups, experiencing economic insecurity or being home in an unsafe situation. Children and school staff need our support. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), stress during an infectious disease can include: worrying about your own health and the health of your loved ones, changing sleep or eating patterns, increasing difficulty in sleeping or concentrating, worsening chronic health problems and mental health conditions, and increasing use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The CDC also identified behaviors to watch in children during this time that indicate stress.

In a recent California Health Care Foundation poll, 27% of Californians said their mental health has worsened a little or a lot in the first week of April. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, telephone calls and texts to Wellspace Health's Suicide Prevention and Crisis line from across California increased by 40 percent between February and March of this year. Tragically, two high school aged children from Natomas died by suicide in the first week of April. While the incidents were unrelated and the reasons are unknown, the Superintendent of Natomas Unified School District said the deaths highlight the need to connect young people with help and services, especially as schools, clubs and gatherings have halted

during the pandemic. We agree with the Superintendent that access to these services is more critical than ever. In my conversations with superintendents in my own district, superintendents have raised this as a priority. In my district, Berryessa Union School District recently approved a contract with a mental health concierge service in order to connect families and staff with the appropriate behavioral health services regardless of insurance status.

Schools are uniquely positioned to provide a navigation platform for providing services and referring students, families, and staff to the appropriate mental health services both during school closures and when they reopen. Research consistently shows schools provide the optimal place to improve access to mental health services. With the understanding of the immense stress and mental health needs of families and school staff during this emergency and the effects that this pandemic will have on their mental health, we respectfully request that \$19.7 million be allocated from the SB 89 funding and made available to school districts to improve access to behavioral health services. School districts may use the funding in the following ways, but are not limited to these uses:

- Increasing the number of mental health professionals and/or school support personnel, including school counselors, nurses, psychologists and social workers, available to students or staff.
- Contracting with a mental health navigation or concierge service that will provide navigation services to families and staff free of charge and regardless of insurance or lack thereof.
- Increasing capacity to deliver behavioral health services through telehealth technology in order to provide these services during stay-at home-orders and ensure access to these services where availability of mental health professionals is limited once the orders are lifted.

In addition to directing funding to school districts, we are requesting \$300,000 of the SB 89 emergency funds be allocated to the California Department of Education in order to implement AB 2315 (Quirk-Silva, Chapter 759, Statutes of 2018) to provide guidelines to schools on how to deliver behavioral health services through telehealth technology. The school-based telehealth model is an evidence-based opportunity proven effective in numerous sites across the country. California is one of the worst states in the country for school personnel support services ratios and is experiencing a mental health professional shortage. With current ratios, timely access to services is extremely difficult. Telehealth provides a way for mental health professionals to serve more students across the state, without transportation, distance from services and risking their health as barriers to accessing services.

As students, families and school staff across the state face various challenges, schools are uniquely positioned to help fill gaps in access and care. Therefore, we respectfully request \$20 million of the SB 89 emergency funds be allocated to support the mental health of students, families, and school staff. Thank you for your consideration and leadership during these trying times. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at (916)-319-2025.

Sincerely,



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Assemblymember, 25th District



SHARON QUIRK-SILVA
Assemblymember, 65th District



SYDNEY KAMLAGER
Assemblymember, 54th District



STEVEN CHOI, PH.D.
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