



June 24, 2020

Dear Members of the Education Finance Committee:

NAMI Minnesota is deeply concerned about the mental health of students and their families during COVID-19. We understand why schools closed and the need to shift to distance learning. Dealing with a pandemic is new territory for all of us. We greatly appreciate the lengths to which teachers, staff, school support personnel, and school administrators moved quickly to online learning to ensure that students continued to be educated and supported. They performed a herculean task. We know that they did the best they could.

Despite their best efforts, however, the pandemic has caused great stress on students and parents, put a spotlight on the inequities and disparities in our state, and left some students behind. The extreme stress felt by students and parents is due to a number of things: uncertainty of the future, economic and housing instability, isolation, too much togetherness, fear of catching COVID-19, and grief due to cancellation of major life events such as graduations, prom, concerts, weddings and funerals. Add to this parents who are trying to work at home or in essential jobs and teach their children at the same time. Time and patience are stretched thin. Some families don't have access to computers or tablets and have unstable or no Internet making it more difficult to benefit from distance learning.

For parents whose children are on an IEP, they have faced additional hurdles. Some students had paraprofessional assigned to them most of the day. At home, there is no extra help. Some families had in-home supports through Children's Therapeutic Services and Supports, but due to the pandemic, they lost that support. Some students were in day treatment within school buildings. Those programs were largely closed. A few have opened back up, but many districts will not allow those programs in their closed buildings. Some parents have no idea how to help their child and are not families with how to adapt the curriculum, etc. They are not trained special education teachers.

To try to keep a child with a mental illness well during a pandemic, and to try to teach them, has been extremely difficult. Many of the parents we have talked with are struggling and have had to focus on keeping their child safe - not hurting themselves - instead of educating them. The murder of Mr. Floyd has added to the emotional distress being experienced by some of these students and families. Simply put, parents feel at a loss and fear that their children will be far behind when school starts again in the fall.

In looking to the future, we ask that additional attention be placed on students' mental health.



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This includes encouraging schools to participate in NAMI Minnesota's efforts to put the suicide lifeline and text line on the back of student IDs and to have their staff take the newly rolled out Kognito online training on suicide prevention. In addition, we support increased dollars for school support personnel, school-linked mental health, trauma informed schools, and social emotional learning. It is more important than ever that we provide alternatives to suspension, especially for grades K-3, as these children will not have the coping skills to deal with the pandemic and the changes they will experience in the fall even if students return to school buildings. Lastly, we ask that school districts open up their doors to mental health providers to allow them to address the needs of students who are really struggling with their mental health and to consider allowing paraprofessionals to go to students' homes.

Students cannot learn when their mental health is poor. Please do what you can to increase access to mental health services for our students and provide extra support to those students in special education and their families. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sue Abderholden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of the first name being a large, stylized "S".

Sue Abderholden, MPH
Executive Director