



## Statement in Support of SB 1376 and HB 2656

Help & Hope for YOUth, a Southern Arizona community initiative to reduce stigma and improve youth mental health, supports SB 1376 and HB 2656 which will require mental health instruction in Arizona schools.

In 2018 the National Alliance on Mental Illness Southern Arizona created Help & Hope for YOUth to reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions and increase help-seeking among young people. NAMI's experience in delivering a volunteer-based classroom education program called Ending the Silence convinced the leadership that this simple 50-minute presentation could have a powerful effect on students' understanding of mental illness and willingness to talk about it and get help. As one student said about participating in Ending the Silence, **"this will save lives."**

From that beginning, our Help & Hope for YOUth Alliance has grown to include 52 members representing schools and districts, healthcare providers, youth-serving agencies, law enforcement, faith organizations, government agencies and individuals. One of our primary goals is to see mental health education included in the state education standards so all students in Arizona receive this instruction. We commend Senator Bowie and his fellow sponsors for introducing this legislation and we support its passage.

This legislation is especially important now. The state of youth mental health was grim before the pandemic, and, as we are all aware, the pandemic is taking a serious toll on our children. A national survey of high school students last August found **24% said they knew of someone who had had suicidal thoughts since the start of COVID-19**, and 5% reported they had made a suicide attempt. Two thirds of participants reported that they had never sought help from school counseling services.

Stigma--bias, distrust, stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger, avoidance--keeps our children from receiving the understanding, support and treatment they need. Providing students with mental health curricula in their classes can be highly successful in reducing stigma, changing current attitudes and can affect access to care. Of nearly 2000 students who participated in Ending the Silence or Text Talk Act classroom mental health education, 85% said after the presentations they know early warning signs of mental health conditions and **86% said they now know how to help themselves or a friend if they notice warning signs**. This student's comment is representative of the evaluation responses: "There are people willing to listen to me; I don't have to be afraid."

Students who are dealing with anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions struggle with learning. If we want students to achieve academically, we need to provide mental health education to encourage them to reach out and access help. Mentally healthy students are more likely to go to school ready to learn, actively engage in school activities, have supportive and caring connections with adults and their peers, use appropriate problem-solving skills, exhibit nonaggressive behaviors, and add to positive school culture.

Once symptoms are recognized, the earlier a young person can access mental health care, the more effective it can be. Early treatment can help keep youth in school and on track to achieving their life goals. **With mental health education, followed by support and treatment, we can reduce substance use, self-harm, and suicide among young people**. This legislation will provide for educating a new generation to be free from stigma in how they view and treat themselves and others.