



***Testimony of
New York State Congress of Parents & Teachers
(NYS Parent Teacher Association)***

***By
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***NYS Senate Standing Committees on Education
and NYC Education to examine school policies
related to discipline and suspension***

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Albany

I am Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, the Executive Director of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. (NYS PTA), and am proud to represent our 220,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents and families of our 2.6 million public school children. It is our mission to make every child's potential a reality and support EVERY child with ONE voice.

On behalf of President Helen Hoffman and our members, NYS PTA appreciates the opportunity to comment on how we can work best to support ALL of our students in our schools, home and community. And importantly, discussions related to school discipline and suspension continue to be of critical importance to PTA, families, and educators.

Public-school education must give every child an equal chance to grow into a successful and flourishing member of society. A public-school education lays the foundation for a lifetime of opportunity and accomplishment.

Yet while our children try to learn, and our educators try to teach, they struggle daily. Alarming, we have seen significant changes in student behavior during the most recent pandemic years, and significant changes in student mental health. Sadly, these two issues are often related and intermingled.

According to a recent letter to Governor Hochul from our partner, the Mental Health Association in NYS, data from a survey study from April 2022 shows a **135% increase in depression, and a 110% increase in anxiety among older students between 2013 and 2021.**

The Mental Health in America Report agrees, and details **that 1 in 6 high school students has made a suicide plan in the past year – an increase of over 40% from the past decade.**

What's more alarming?

- **50% of chronic mental illnesses begin by age 14**
- **50% of lifetime cases of anxiety disorders begin as early as 8 years**
- **22% of youth experience serious mental illness each year**

These mental health needs can lead to student discipline issues, and without adequate supports at the school building levels, students may not receive the care they need to succeed and thrive.

No one in education wants a child, especially a child in crisis, to be suspended. However, many of our schools – dare we say most of our schools - have not had adequate resources, staff, professional development, or training, to appropriately support ALL of our students.

We all know the statistics. There is little argument. Our students with disabilities, our high-need poor students, our black students, our Hispanic students, our Latinx students, our LGBTQIA+ students, and our male students, are suspended at disproportional rates than their peers.

We must tackle this problem together, but it cannot be decoupled from the mental health support our children need, and the programmatic and fiscal support our schools need to support all students.

We are truly thankful to the legislature and Governor Hochul for your commitment to full funding of foundation aid, we are appreciative of the infusion of federal resources to support students, and we are hopeful that these initiatives will give schools more resources and support to expand needed programs and services for students. We believe this may lead to reductions in discipline issues and suspensions.

We also know that some schools do a fantastic job of meaningful restorative practices and support for students, while others may struggle to implement successful programs and need more support and guidance.

As written, we do not fully support the legislation as it relates to school suspensions – however, we are looking forward to continuing to engage heavily in this work.

NYS PTA, alongside the Educational Conference Board (ECB), previously issued concepts related to meaningful restorative practices. You can read some of them [here](#) and [here](#). These recommendations were made pre-pandemic, and now, we have renewed our commitment to this work.

NYS PTA is proud to have just appointed a new Juvenile Protection Specialist, who will work with staff and volunteer parent leaders on solutions for suspensions and support for the expansion of restorative practices.

Further, **NYS PTA is chairing a new ECB committee on student health, wellness and safety as we continue to tackle these issues collectively.** Also, NYS PTA is proud to serve on the **State Education Department’s School Safety Taskforce**, which is grappling with these issues as a PK-12 education community.

However, we cannot do this alone, and we truly thank the members of the legislature, stakeholders, parents, families, educators, and Governor Hochul - as we know we have partners in you to find meaningful solutions for ALL students, educators and schools.

Every parent and family has a dream for their children. It is our job to be dream makers, ensuring every child, no matter their zip code, no matter their ethnicity, no matter their ability, no matter their gender identity and expression, no matter their race, has the highest quality 21st century education to lead them to success in college, career or life.

We humbly ask that you continue to advocate for infusing our schools with the tools and resources necessary to accelerate the success of our children and families, and to continue to support EVERY child with ONE voice. Together, we can Support Children, Raise Awareness, and make every child’s potential a reality. No other work is more important.