



**Testimony of Amy Bradley – Director, State Policy
Sandy Hook Promise Action Fund**

***Education Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
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Good morning, Chair Schweyer, Chair Topper, and fellow committee members.

My name is Amy Bradley and today I join you in my capacity as Director of State Policy at Sandy Hook Promise. Based in Newtown, Connecticut, Sandy Hook Promise is formed and led by several families whose loved ones were killed in the tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school on December 14, 2012. On that day, 20 children and six adults went to school and never returned home.

The issues of suicide, suicidal ideation, self-harm, acts of violence towards others, and social isolation can be very real among K-12 students. These feelings are not confined to students in other states; it is also a significant concern in Pennsylvania.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, in Pennsylvania suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for people aged 10-24 and according to StopBullying.gov, Pennsylvania is ranked 6th nationwide when it comes to students being bullied.

Thankfully, schools in Pennsylvania have started seeking out solutions. Sandy Hook Promise is very familiar with many of these. For example, there are 142 SAVE Promise Clubs¹ with over 4400 students participating state-wide. These clubs are a part of Sandy Hook Promise's commitment to youth leadership.

However, this natural shift toward finding tools to better support students has resulted in unintended disparities. That is, for a variety of reasons, not all Pennsylvania students have equal access to high-quality, evidence-based violence prevention training. This unintentional disparity underscores the necessity for a statewide strategy that ensures all students have an opportunity to develop skills they can use to help connect someone else – or themselves – to help when it is needed most.

Such an approach is essential and aligns seamlessly with the objectives of the Safety and Violence for Education Act (HB 2086). Known as the SAVE Students Act, this bill is not merely a set of guidelines. It is a blueprint for creating a culture of awareness, empowerment, and support. Concisely: this approach can save lives.

Section I emphasizes the crucial role of suicide prevention training that centers the needs and interests of students. It is simple—a minimum of one hour of evidence-based suicide prevention training each year for students in grades 6-12. This training will enable students (and educators) to identify the observable warning signs of depression and suicidal ideation, for instance. It must also teach students the critical importance of telling a

¹ Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) Promise Club.

trusted adult what they know – in a timely manner. With these tools, responsible adults can intervene early, guide students to the help they need, and save lives!

But the legislation does not stop there. Given the urgency and frequency with which students are experiencing heightened mental health needs, it cannot stop there.

Section II centers general violence prevention training for students. By teaching students to recognize the observable warning signs of someone who is at risk of harming themselves or others, the legislation empowers youth to take threats seriously and act promptly. It also positions them to be active participants in contributing to the safety of their friends, fellow students, and the overall school environment. In short: it makes clear that their voices matter.

Next, the legislation considers the impact of social isolation. Section III is designed to provide students with training that will help them recognize social isolation and equip them with strategies to reach out and connect with their peers. Imagine a school where no one feels invisible, where every student matters, where students feel connected and committed to one another's general wellbeing, and where friendships flourish instead of falter.

To ensure that these initiatives resonate and thrive, the SAVE Students Act also includes student-led violence prevention clubs. These clubs will be open to all students, creating a platform for them to engage, educate, and lead using what they have learned in the violence-prevention trainings. These clubs could be existing clubs that raise their hand to be the keeper - and sharer – of knowledge. These upstanders will carry the message of prevention and inclusion into every corner of their schools.

In closing, I ask you once again to imagine a school; imagine a school where every student feels safe and supported. Where every student feels welcomed and connected. Where every student can identify a trusted adult. Think of a future where every student has the tools and resources they need to recognize the observable warning signs, not just in themselves, but also in their friends. And in which every student understands the vital importance of telling their trusted adult what they know.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania has a way to make this imaginary scenario real. It is called the SAVE Students Act; HB2086, and I respectfully ask for your support.

Thank you.