

Testimony as Prepared for Delivery in Support of SB23-004: Employment of School Mental Health Professionals by Riley Kitts, Sr. Director of Policy and Government Affairs at the Colorado Children's Campaign

Senate Health and Human Services Committee

Feb. 9, 2023, 1:30 p.m.

SCR 357

Thank you, Madame Chair and members of the committee. My name is Riley Kitts and I am the Senior Director of Policy and Government Affairs at the Colorado Children's Campaign.

The Colorado Children's Campaign is a non-profit, non-partisan, policy, research, and advocacy organization, committed to securing every chance for every child in Colorado since our founding in 1985. That includes advocating for better support for our state's youth and adolescents. We also convene the School Climate Coalition which is a cross-sector group of K-12, health, youth-serving organizations, and state agencies focused on improving Colorado learning environments to be safe and supportive.

We appreciate the chance to voice our support for SB23-004 and thank Senators Marchman and Jaquez Lewis for their leadership on this bill to remove barriers to school employment of mental health professionals.

The share of Colorado youth experiencing negative mental health outcomes has significantly increased in recent years. National data tell us that secondary students at every grade level state that depression, stress, and anxiety is the most common barrier to learning. And fewer than half of them, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and racial identity, have an adult they feel comfortable talking to when stressed or upset (Youth Truth). State data from the 2021 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey found that 40% of youth experienced feelings of depression in the past year, an increase of 35% since 2019.

With this knowledge comes a responsibility to provide access to affordable, high quality behavioral health care services and professionals in every region of the state. We know anecdotally that many schools and districts struggle with workforce challenges. Senate Bill 4 works to address regulatory challenges to this access.

Schools are crucial settings for addressing the mental wellness of students. Data show that more than half of mental health challenges begin before the age of 14. Of those students who access the treatment they need, at least 70% begin their journey to treatment at school.

Access to mental health professionals in school settings is more critical than ever to the well-being of young people in our state.

We support this effort to increase access to quality, licensed mental health professionals in our schools. We urge a yes vote on Senate Bill 4. Thank you for your time.