



Joint Committee on Education
June 25, 2019
Testimony of Attorney General Maura Healey
(As prepared for delivery)

Good afternoon, Chairman Lewis, Chairwoman Peisch, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I'm here to express my support for H. 483 and S. 285, *An Act relative to safety and violence education for students*, the SAVE Students Act.

Thank you to the sponsors, Senator Finegold and Representative Higgins, for their leadership on this important legislation.

And my special thanks to Mark Barden, who has become a dear friend and inspired much of my office's work. His strength and resolve to turn an unimaginable loss into action, to prevent other families from suffering the devastating pain that he and his family have experienced, is truly remarkable.

My message today is simple: there is nothing more important than protecting the safety and wellbeing of our young people.

At a time when our children are standing up, marching on the streets, and walking out of classrooms in protest, we adults must listen and act.

As you know, gun violence is a public health crisis. Across the U.S., 40,000 people die every year and 100 people die every day at the hand of a gun. Two-thirds of gun deaths are suicides.

In Massachusetts, we also know that thoughts and prayers are not enough. They were not enough to prevent Virginia Tech, Columbine, Southerland Springs, Parkland and Newtown. And they are not enough to stem the violence and trauma on our streets and in our homes.

In Massachusetts, we know that strong gun laws save lives. We have among the strongest gun laws in the country, and as a result, among the lowest gun death rates.

But we also know that there is no single solution to the complex issue of gun violence. We must address this crisis from all angles.

Gun violence remains a serious issue in communities across Massachusetts – some of which experience shootings almost daily and for which the cycles of trauma and violence are all too real.

Our young people are also experiencing violence and trauma in schools. Last year, more than 1,000 students were disciplined for carrying weapons on school grounds.

And given the number of recent school shootings, teachers in Massachusetts are concerned about an incident happening here – about their town making the next headline.

Students are scared and anxious about going to school. And they are tired of interrupting math class for active shooter drills.

We have had threats of school shootings across the state and even incidents of students posting images of themselves with firearms on social media with language threatening to “shoot-up the school Parkland-style.”

We are also seeing an alarming trend around mental health, particularly among young people. U.S. suicide rates are the highest they have been in decades. Our middle and high school students are increasingly experiencing anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders.

Since 2000, our state's suicide rate has increased exponentially – by at least 63%. Suicides have become the second leading cause of death among young people in Massachusetts, and more than one in four high school students report feeling “depressed daily.”

The message is loud, and the need is clear: we must do more to invest in and prioritize prevention.

This is why my office has partnered with Sandy Hook Promise -- to *expand* violence prevention and mental health programming in school districts across our state.

Last year, we were awarded \$1 million through the U.S. Department of Justice's STOP School Violence Prevention and Mental Health Training Program to bring three of Sandy Hook Promise's life-saving education programs to more Massachusetts schools.

Over the next couple of years, we'll bring Sandy Hook Promise's programs to over 140,000 students across 50 school districts. All at no cost to schools.

And in just the few months since we started this partnership, Superintendents have expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to receive these programs, and teachers are sharing only positive feedback from the first trainings.

One school staff member said, “This program has already begun to make a positive impact, and we have only had our first assembly...I have

already had 10 students come to office to express their interest in [student-led violence prevention clubs].

Staff also found [the training] extremely positive, and I believe it will help make a cohesive effort towards thwarting violence in schools and communities and supporting our students' social-emotional needs.”

We are very proud of this initiative, but let me say – it is only a start.

We need violence prevention and mental health programming in every single one of Massachusetts' 300 plus school districts.

This is why I am here with my colleagues to say we need to pass the SAVE Students Act and fund its implementation, because it will do just that.

By educating and empowering our students to know the warning signs and how to ask for help before someone hurts themselves or others, we WILL save lives. We WILL prevent senseless deaths.

Now is the time for Massachusetts to be set a national example and send a resounding message -- enough is enough.

I urge you to report these bills out favorably from the Committee.

Thank you.