

KIMBERLY A. WILLIAMS
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
19th District



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STATE OF DELAWARE
411 LEGISLATIVE AVENUE
DOVER, DELAWARE 19901

COMMITTEES
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Labor, Vice-Chair
Appropriations
Housing & Community Affairs
Joint Finance
Manufactured Housing
Revenue & Finance

House Education Committee Meeting Minutes
3.10.21

Chair Williams called the virtual meeting to order at 3:02 p.m. She stated that the meeting was planned in accordance with HCR 1 and took the roll call of the committee's members. Members present included Vice-Chair Chukwuocha and Reps. Bolden, Matthews, Heffernan, Kowalko, Lynn, Morrison, Osienski, Bush, Moore, Briggs King, Collins, Postles, Ramone, Shupe, and Smith.

Chair Williams introduced **HB 89, AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 14 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**. Chair Williams stated that this stated that this bill was released from committee last year, before the COVID-19 pandemic, then explained that the bill makes adjustment to the teacher certification process for those looking to teach in educational areas that are in critical need of teachers.

As there were no questions from committee members, Chair Williams opened the floor to public comment.

Member of the public Robert Overmiller voiced support for the bill.

Tammy Croce of the Delaware Association of School Administrators (DASA) and Dawn Alexander of the Colonial School District also expressed support for the HB 89.

A motion was made by Rep. Briggs King and seconded by Rep. Smith to release HB 89 from committee. The motion carried. Yes = 17 (Chair Williams, Vice Chair Chukwuocha, Reps. Bolden, Matthews, Heffernan, Kowalko, Lynn, Morrison, Osienski, Bush, Moore, Briggs King, Hensley, Collins, Postles, Ramone, Smith); No = 0; Absent = 1 (Rep. Shupe). The bill was released from committee with a F=8, M=8, U=0 vote.

Next, Chair Williams introduced **HS 1 for HB 92, AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 14 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO THE TERM OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**, which is sponsored by Representative Baumbach. Rep. Baumbach explained that this bill aims to reduce the term for local school board members from five years to four years, indicating that doing so would bring Delaware more in line with terms in most states. He also expressed that reducing term lengths would encourage increased public ownership of local school boards.

Chair Williams asked for questions and statements from committee members. Representative Kowalko expressed reservations regarding the state exerting power over local councils and governments. He also stated that reducing terms to four years could result in increased politicization of Delaware's school boards, which are nonpartisan. Representative Heffernan expressed similar concerns and stated that her constituents and school board members within her district are opposed to the legislation, and Representative Matthews echoed those same sentiments. All three said they do not support this bill.

Representative Morrison stated he supports this bill but is concerned that local school board members need a great deal of time to adjust to their roles and the expectations that come with the position. Representative Briggs King seconded these statements, adding that board members are unpaid, have unpaid staff, and that the first year entails a steep learning curve. Rep. Briggs King continued, saying that technical school board members are appointed by the governor and have no term limits, then voiced her opposition to the bill.

Representative Moore expressed support for the bill because some school boards do a poor job of supporting students and teachers and shorter term limits will allow more supportive board members to be elected sooner.

Representative Chukwuocha agreed with Rep. Moore, stating that shorter term limits would be beneficial for his constituents in Wilmington, where teacher turnover is high and support for students and teachers can be lacking.

Representative Smith stated that Delaware General Assembly members have a steep learning curve as well and are expected to do their jobs on a two-year timeframe. He went on to say that Delaware's local school boards are already becoming increasingly politicized and shortening term limits will likely have little to no effect on this trend.

Chair Williams indicated that she is a co-sponsor of HS 1, and Rep. Baumbach stated that the impetus behind this bill comes from the public and that school board member terms are already staggered to occur every year, so the four-year election cycle should not present itself as an issue.

Chair Williams then opened the floor to public comment.

Kristin Dwyer, Director of Legislation for the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA) voiced support of the bill, stating that DSEA sees the legislation as a technical change.

Ann Bookout of Delaware United expressed support of the bill and suggested that school board elections be held on Election Day in order to encourage increased voter participation.

Members of the public Robert Overmiller and Mary Schorse voiced their support of the bill, as did Sarah Bucic of the Delaware PTA and Laurie Jacobs of First State Education.

Dr. John Marinucci of the Delaware School Boards Association (DSBA) expressed opposition to the legislation.

At the conclusion of public comment, Chair Williams asked for a motion. Representative Bolden made a motion for the bill to be released from committee, and Rep. Chukwuocha seconded the motion. Initially, the bill did not have the required number of votes to be released from committee and Chair Williams stated it did not pass.

Representative Ramone asked if the bill could be walked to Representative Shupe, who was absent from this portion of the meeting and whose vote could be the deciding factor on whether or not the bill was released from committee. Representative Lynn, who originally voted against HS 1, then said that he would change his vote to "yes" in order for the bill to reach the House floor for debate. Rep. Lynn made a motion to reconsider HS 1, and Rep. Bolden seconded this motion. The motion to reconsider passed.

A motion was made by Rep. Ramone and seconded by Rep. Morrison to release HS 1 for HB 92 from committee. The motion carried. Yes = 10 (Chair Williams, Vice Chair Chukwuocha, Reps. Bolden, Lynn, Morrison, Osienski, Moore, Collins, Ramone, Smith); No = 7 (Matthews, Heffernan, Kowalko, Bush, Briggs King, Hensley, Postles); Absent = 1 (Rep. Shupe). The bill was released from committee with a F=6, M=4, U=0 vote.

Chair Williams introduced **HB 100, AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 14 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO FREE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**, which seeks to increase the number of licensed school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists in Delaware's public schools. Bill sponsor Representative Longhurst explained that this bill was in committee two years ago but was never released from appropriations. Rep. Longhurst presented numerous facts about the troubling mental health issues facing today's youth and stated that Delaware ranks 34th in the nation regarding the ratio of mental health professionals to students, which is 1:580 and is far greater than the national average. She said that some schools in the state don't have counselors or psychologists.

Chair Williams stated that she is a co-sponsor of this bill and asked for committee members' questions and statements. All committee members who spoke voiced strong support of HB 100. Rep. Kowalko expressed his belief that the health of Delaware's children is invaluable and indicated that funding is already available to cover the cost of implementing this legislation. Rep. Briggs King echoed those same comments and stated she believes this

change is long overdue. Rep. Heffernan indicated she is a co-sponsor of the bill and reiterated her support.

Representative Collins voiced his support in light of information he's received regarding shuttered Boy Scout troops and students who have left the school system and are unaccounted for. He said the past year has been incredibly difficult for everyone (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and that schools and mental health professionals are more important than ever for the state's children. Representative Shupe indicated that the return on investment in this bill will be great, and that early intervention in students' mental health journeys is key. Rep. Chukwuocha added that HB 100 will allow educators to focus on teaching while providing appropriate supports for students in need.

Rep. Longhurst stated that an amendment to this bill is already in the works that would allow units to be allocated to areas of high need, which was an opportunity identified by Rep. Chukwuocha. Representative Osienski voiced his support for HB 100, and Rep. Longhurst closed by stating that the bill does include allocations for speech and language pathologists in addition to mental health professionals.

Chair Williams opened the floor to public comment.

Lauren Vella of the Delaware Department of Justice indicated her support, stating that the juvenile and adult corrections institutions would be less strained if young people's mental health concerns were addressed early and effectively.

Kristin Dwyer (DSEA) expressed her support, as did Dr. Christina Cammerata of Nemours at A. I. DuPont Hospital, Anne Sleese of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Delaware, Ann Bookout (Delaware United), Sarah Bucic (Delaware PTA), Tammy Croce (DASA), Dr. John Marinucci (DSBA), and Eric Pizzini, President of the School Psychologists Association.

Members of the public who provided personal testimonials in support of the bill included Heather Van Stolk, Brandon Townsend, Krissy Hall, and Dawn Hall.

Members of the public who voiced support of HB 100 were Emily Klein, Edris Harrell, Lorraine James, Brianna Brown, Scarlett Tribo, Rachel Valentin, Nichole Stokes, Brittany Zehr, Frederique Seals, and Jessica Kradjel.

A motion was made by Rep. Bush and seconded by Rep. Hensley to release HB 100 from committee. The motion carried. Yes = 17 (Chair Williams, Vice Chair Chukwuocha, Reps. Matthews, Heffernan, Kowalko, Lynn, Morrison, Osienski, Bush, Moore, Briggs King, Hensley, Collins, Postles, Ramone, Shupe, Smith); No = 0; Absent = 1 (Rep. Bolden). The bill was released from committee with a F=11, M=5, U=0 vote.

Chair Williams adjourned the meeting at 5:23 p.m.

Speaker List

Robert Overmiller

Tammy Croce, Delaware Association of School Administrators (DASA)

Dawn Alexander, Colonial School District

Kristin Dwyer, Director of Legislation for the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA)

Ann Bookout, Delaware United

Mary Schorse

Sarah Bucic, Delaware PTA

Laurie Jacobs, First State Education.

Dr. John Marinucci, Delaware School Boards Association (DSBA)

Lauren Vella, Delaware Department of Justice

Dr. Christina Cammerata of Nemours at A. I. DuPont Hospital

Anne Slease of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Delaware

Eric Pizzini, President of the School Psychologists Association

Heather Van Stolk

Brandon Townsend

Krissy Hall

Dawn Hall

Emily Klein

Edris Harrell

Lorraine James

Brieanna Brown

Scarlett Tribo

Rachel Valentin

Nichole Stokes

Brittany Zehr

Frederique Seals

Jessica Kradjel

Submitted Public Comment

I hope this email finds you well. I am thankful for having the opportunity to sit in the hearing yesterday and listen to all of the compelling testimonies of my colleagues for why HB 100 is so important. I am writing to also ask for support and funding for HB 100.

I am a mental health therapist currently working in the Brandywine school district in the elementary emotional support program. I have worked as a school therapist for the past 10 years and witnessed first-hand, the continual increase in the percentage of student population that seeks out or is in need of therapeutic support. Due to the high ratio of therapist/ psychologist/school counselor to student, the needs of many of our Delaware students continue to be unmet. Unfortunately, this high ratio has led to a system in which only the most dire situations can access support at school, so those who may be more amenable to treatment (those experiencing lower-level symptoms) do not get support until their symptoms or situations worsen. Additionally, due to Covid-19, we have seen an exponential increase in the number of students who would benefit from therapeutic, and counseling supports. The outcome for students who suffer from mental health issues are very often negative (especially those that develop in elementary school), and the longer it takes for a child to be identified and supported, the more significant the impact will be on that child's long-term well-being. Having more support in the elementary schools to identify and support these vulnerable and at-risk children is critical.

I feel encouraged and optimistic about this bill and I truly hope HB 100 receives the full support and funding necessary to move forward.

Thank you for your time,

Julia Shay

Hello. My name is Eric Pizzini and I am the president of the Delaware Association of School Psychologists. First, thank you to committee chair representative Williams, and members of the house education committee for the opportunity to speak today. I am here in support of HB100 and the moral and fiscal responsibility that the state of Delaware has to increase mental health supports in our schools.

We continue to hear the statistics coming out showing the growing mental health needs of our children. The CDC states that 1 in 6 children between the age of 2 and 8 years, so about 17%, have a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. Suicide is now climbing up to the 2nd leading cause of death for children between 10 and 19. I have dealt with student suicidality regularly, including having to witness a student be wheeled out of the building on a stretcher after an attempt. This student was on my list to meet with later that day. It's clear children need more support, and with research showing that 2/3rds of students who receive mental health supports only do so in a school setting, we need adequate mental health staff in the schools to address these growing concerns.

We are in a state of crisis regarding the mental health of our children, and that was before the COVID19 Pandemic. Rates of anxiety and depression in children are skyrocketing during the past year. Our schools need more school psychologists, counselors, and social workers now more than ever to address these concerns. We can address this by providing individual and group counseling, by providing risk assessments for students in crisis thinking of harming themselves or others, by connecting students and families to community resources, by participating in school teams to implement prevention and intervention programs to help support all students.

Too often, districts and administrators need to make difficult decisions around how to allocate staff. Should funding go toward a school psychologist or a teacher to support smaller class sizes, a school counselor or transportation staff to support less crowding on busses, a school social worker, or IT staff to help support increasing technological needs and demands. HB100 will provide the dedicated mental health unit so these decisions do not need to be made.

While these decisions are difficult, our school mental health providers often have to make even more challenging decisions. With so many students struggling with their mental health needs, our school psychologists, counselors, and social workers are faced with the impossible question: Which student do I help and which do I not? With not enough time and resources to help all students in need, this decision happens daily, and often keeps us up at night.

And finally, the fiscal responsibility here is staggering as well. You can hire 1 school psychologist for around 100,000 a year, who would work with 700 students given HB100. In comparison, it cost the state roughly 150,000 a year to incarcerate just one child. With research suggesting that as many as 70% of children in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosable mental health disorder, HB 100 could allow us to support these students early on, disrupting the school to prison pipeline and ultimately costing taxpayers significantly less money.

Given all this information, it's clear the need to support HB100. Our children are worth it.

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Dr. Christina Cammarata and I am a pediatric psychologist and serve as the Clinical Director for Child Clinical Psychology at Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of HB100.

On behalf of Nemours, I want to first thank Representative Longhurst for her ongoing work on HB100 and longstanding commitment to providing mental health resources to children in Delaware. I also want to thank the additional 51 Representatives and Senators who recognize the importance of this issue and chose to sponsor or cosponsor this legislation.

Nemours strongly supports HB100 as a logical and appropriate step to improve access to behavioral health services and help Delaware meet federal requirements pertaining to the availability of mental health professionals. Social workers, counselors and psychologists within the school system are often the first touchpoint for students and families needing mental health supports. More importantly, these professionals often proactively identify students needing support rather than waiting for problems to emerge or students to self-identify.

There has never been a more important time to provide mental health supports to our children. As a children's hospital, we know firsthand the effects COVID is having on our youth. Nationally, there has been an approximately 30% increase in emergency department visits for psychiatric presentations; something we are also seeing locally at duPont Hospital for Children.

On an outpatient basis, our Division of Behavioral Health is seeing more patients than ever for outpatient therapy, behavior management clinics, therapy groups, autism consultations, and specialty care consults in our medical clinics. And the pediatric psychologists embedded in each of our 12 Delaware primary care practices are working diligently to meet the needs of the community. We empathize with the overwhelming demand that mental health staff currently working in schools feel. Addressing the problem will require a variety of solutions from a variety of stakeholders if we want to get this right for our kids. But the importance of having a strong mental health system in our schools cannot be overstated.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected children and families in many different ways. In particular, racial and income disparities have become incredibly pronounced over the past 12 months. While we do not yet have clear data, it's imperative to consider that these disparities may flow into mental health as well. For this reason it will be important to prioritize mental health services to ensure they reach the highest risk schools and students in our state.

Early identification is key to effectively managing behavioral health issues, along with the use of empirically based treatments. Treating pediatric mental health disorders early improves overall outcomes and prevents long-term negative consequences for both physical and mental health. Schools are the primary point of contact for children on a consistent basis. Ensuring adequate staff resources within those systems is critical for providing early guidance and science-based interventions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of HB100 to ensure students in Delaware schools have access to appropriate mental health services, leading to more optimal outcomes for whole child wellness.

The League of Women Voters of Delaware wishes to be on record in favor of HB 100. This is based on our position supporting policies and programs that promote the well-being, development and safety of all children. A Mental Health professional in the school could frankly be a child's only access to such services, and the need for mental health intervention is more important than ever. The data supporting such need is strong, and yet, as we all know, mental health services have a stigma. For the youngest of children, the need may well be ignored. We must not let that happen, especially since early support could provide the intervention that prevents greater problems in the future. The advantages of having these services available right at the school make up a very long list – and not just for the child, who is the direct beneficiary of the care and whose time away from school will be minimized. Parents, too, are aided by not having to lose work time to get to school, pick up their child, and take him/her to a provider, if they are even willing to recognize and accept the need. We recognize that resources are being stretched these days to address the many issues our state faces, but the welfare and wellbeing of our children must take center stage. We urge support for HB 100.

Respectfully submitted by:

Val Gould, Legislative Fellow