

OPINION



Legislators, lobbyists and others stand outside the room during a meeting of the Illinois Senate Executive Committee on May 28 in Springfield. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Screening kids for mental health struggles connects intervention to prevention

By Sara Feigenholtz

The data is undeniable: Too many of our kids today face an unprecedented mental health crisis with suicide inching up to the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10 to 24, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A recent Tribune editorial acknowledged the progress made in removing the stigmas associated with mental health but called into question a state bill I sponsored that Gov. JB Pritzker signed into law last month. It requires public schools to offer universal mental health screenings to students in grades three through 12.

What motivated me to fight like hell for this law were the years of desperate calls I received from parents, often in tears, not knowing how to support their kids in

crisis, as well as young people reaching out in fear because they had nowhere to turn. It's hard for many parents to navigate the challenges that come with a child who is struggling mentally as it can affect their school, sports or social activities. Sadness, hopelessness and depression too often get chalked up to adolescent angst or growing pains. But my colleagues rallied alongside me and my House co-sponsor, Rep. Lindsey LaPointe, because we recognize the crisis our young people are facing. That's why the bill passed with a 2-1 margin in the Illinois House and unanimously in the Senate.

Where the editorial falls short is in recognizing that this law is but one step in a decadeslong journey to get ahead of our kids' mental health challenges. It's one that I've been taking alongside some of

the most qualified partners imaginable. This includes folks such as Rep. LaPointe, who has been a champion for youth mental health her entire career; national leaders such as Inseparable, a mental health advocacy organization that fights to put mental health at the forefront of public policy in states across the nation; and local mental health champions such as Dana Weiner, who leads the state's Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative, which created the BEACON portal connecting parents and families with comprehensive behavioral health services and resources.

This law is a critical step in connecting intervention to prevention. The state now has two years to bring this opportunity to life. Over the coming year, it will be developing the tools and

processes necessary to deliver a thoughtful, comprehensive screening program. The following year will be spent integrating the program into school districts across the state and communicating with parents and families ahead of when screenings are fully implemented in the 2027-28 school year. While parents are free to opt out of the process, it is my fervent hope that they will recognize the potentially lifesaving benefits to these screenings.

While the editorial cites statistics around false positives in screenings, the benefits of identifying mental health issues on the front end far outweigh any reason to delay. Divorce, family dysfunction, substance abuse, changes in friendships, romantic breakups, social isolation and bullying are examples of what could be seen as "false positives" that are also

among the leading causes of child and teenage suicide.

Mental health is mission critical when it comes to the overall well-being of our young people. They deserve to get a jump-start on that early in life just like they would with getting a vaccination or a checkup at the pediatrician. Illinois will be the first state in the nation to implement universal mental health screenings for kids and teenagers, and it's the right thing to do. This will help us set up our kids for success in life so they can reach their full potential — empowering them and their families to identify their mental health needs at a time in their lives when they're going to need support the most.

State Sen. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, represents the 6th District.

How our vocational schools boost the Illinois economy

By Danielle Harriott

Renee Barry grew up going from one foster home to another, so many she eventually lost count. Once out on her own, she lived with her newborn son in a shelter for single mothers for two years.

Three years ago, Shaylee Forester, 17, lived in a homeless shelter for young women. She soon became a victim of domestic violence so brutal she wound up in a hospital for treatment for the injuries she suffered.

Two years ago, Nickie Hill lost her beloved teenage stepson due mainly to a medical diagnosis. Her career as a nurse was going nowhere as she pulled double shifts as often as three days a week for nominal pay.

All three of these Illinois residents decided to enroll for job training at a vocational school — in this case, Rockford Career College in Rockford.

Almost one-third of all jobs in Illinois by 2031 will require a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree, according to the Association for Career and Technical Education. To meet this demand, Illinois in the 2022-23 school year had 125,022 post-secondary students participating in career and technical education.

A recent survey from USA Today and the research firm Statista named 13 post-secondary trade schools in Illinois (including ours), out of an estimated 96, among the top 250 vocational schools in the United States. The first-of-its-kind survey evaluated 1,800 schools nationwide, but only 1 in 7 institutions, or 14%, earned the distinction.

As it happens, vocational



Kennedy-King College in Chicago. USA Today and the research firm Statista named 13 post-secondary trade schools in Illinois among the top 250 vocational schools in the United States, including Kennedy-King and Rockford Career College. ALEX GARCIA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

schools are having a moment. Early this year, President Donald Trump called for a "renaissance in manufacturing" and, in the bargain, advocated more funding for technical colleges. A few months later, Jim Farley, CEO of Ford, called on U.S. companies to invest in skilled trades and launched a campaign to partner with vocational colleges.

Acceptance of vocational schools as valuable is growing. A survey from the American Staffing Association found that one-third of 2,000 high school graduates (33%) advocated for

enrolling in trade schools, more than the 28% who felt the same about four-year colleges. In community colleges that focus on vocational training, registration rose 16% last year, reaching its highest level since 2018, the National Student Clearinghouse found. Indeed, trade school enrollment overall rose 5% between 2020 and 2023, about double the rate for four-year universities, according to marketing firm research.

Why so? Vocational colleges are significantly more affordable, typically about one-fourth the

cost, and require less time toward a degree, generally two years — and even as little as 10 months for a diploma — rather than four, bringing a faster return on investment.

Students at vocational colleges might otherwise never get the opportunity to go to college. They're generally from low-income and blue-collar backgrounds. They're raised by single parents. They're first-generation college students. They've struggled through drug abuse, trauma and other hardships.

In many vocational schools,

faculty and staff routinely go above and beyond, taking an interest in students outside as well as inside the classroom. They call students at home if they're absent. They address and advise on difficult personal and family issues.

Above all, the schools help the students find jobs, whether as nurses, welders, plumbers, machinists, electricians or personal care aides. They graduate ready to kick-start a career.

I know how this story goes. I was 16, a junior in high school, when I had my first child. But I attended a vocational school — yes, Rockford — and today I'm an educator and college administrator, guiding students to turn a corner the same as my mentors once guided me.

For me, past, present and future have collided. I once sat where our students now sit. I think to myself, 20 years ago I was you. Maybe 20 years from now you could be me.

As for what happened to the three women I singled out above, they all graduated. Today, Barry holds down a solid job as a welder, Forester is a registered medical assistant and Hill is a licensed practical nurse at a post-acute care facility. They're proof that higher education — and, just as important, hands-on job training — can and do make all the difference.

That's just what vocational schools do. Employers everywhere should make sure they get to keep doing it.

Danielle Harriott is vice president of community outreach and alumni affairs at Rockford Career College.