

March 14, 2019

Colorado House Education Committee

Re: HB 19-1194 - Concerning the discipline of kindergarten through second grade students enrolled in publically funded education programs

Dear Chair McLachlan and committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. My name is Dr. Matthew Pesko, I am a board certified psychiatrist and child and adolescent psychiatry fellow, completing my training in June. I am representing the Colorado Psychiatric Society and Colorado Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Society in support of HB 19-1194. I would like to illustrate my support with clinical examples that have come up in my treatment work with young children and their families that is pertinent to this bill.

I recently treated a kindergarten student who was struggling with disruptive behaviors in the classroom. She was periodically aggressive toward her teachers and peers. She was also thought to be a negative influence on the others in the classroom who ended up copying some of her behavior. While her removal from this environment may appeared to have been for the "greater good" of the classroom, it led to negative repercussions for the student. Her academic and social growth was halted. It may have inadvertently increased her negative behaviors because it was viewed by her as a "reward" to be able to be at home. Another repercussion was that her single mother had to stop working because of lack of other childcare arrangements for her daughter.

On the other side of the coin, I have been able to work with a kindergartener and his mother who have been able to avoid this route despite similar behaviors because of the hard work and advocacy of his mother and the school. They considered the antecedents or triggers for his behaviors, ways that the behaviors may have been unintentionally reinforced by the others or the environment, and created a plan that would avoid school suspension or expulsion. These efforts made a significant and positive difference for his academic and social progress as well as his mother's resulting welfare and improved relationship with her son.

Key factors regarding young children and behavior patterns that could otherwise lead to school suspension or removal:

- Rare is the young child who struggles solely with oppositional or disruptive behaviors for no reason; there is usually underlying anxiety, mood, trauma, or family problems that provoke these behaviors and could easily be overlooked
- Schools represent a safe, consistent space for children, some of whom may have otherwise chaotic lives and school removal may serve to reinforce the view that the world is unpredictable and exclusionary
- Positive behaviors often become more solidified if the child has had several days or weeks of positive interactions with their environment, which builds their self-esteem and sense of mastery; removal from school interrupts this opportunity and may inadvertently reinforce negative behavior
- School removal for one child may affect the functioning of the whole family secondary to repercussions on the parent's working schedule, harsh feelings toward the child that carries over to other family members, among other factors

I hope that you will support HB 19-1194 which will provide important alternatives to school suspension while improving service acquisition for behavior problems in young children. I would be happy to take any questions.

Sincerely,

Matthew Pesko, M.D.