

March 4, 2021

The Honorable Connie Leyva  
Chair, Senate Committee on Education  
Capitol Office  
State Capitol, Room 4061  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Senate Bill 224 (Portantino) – Pupil instruction: mental health education

Dear Senator Leyva,

I am writing to express my strong support for SB 224, which would ensure that California students receive crucial mental health education. Mental Health America of Los Angeles is one of the largest and most comprehensive mental health agencies in Los Angeles County, serving nearly 10,500 low-income individuals with mental health needs each year. MHALA has 15 service delivery sites throughout Los Angeles County, staffed by nearly 400 employees.

Children and youth are experiencing escalating mental health needs, and face numerous barriers to accessing care and support. According to the most recent [Commonwealth Fund Scorecard](#) on State Health System Performance, California ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation for providing children with needed mental health care. Early data indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic is further exacerbating children's mental health needs. For example, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reported that beginning in April 2020, the proportion of mental-health related emergency department visits among all pediatric emergency department visits increased by 24% for children ages 5-11 and by 31% for children ages 12-17. Similarly, COVID-19 has taken a considerable toll on the young people MHALA serves.

Now more than ever, it is critical that California equip all of its students with the information and tools necessary to promote positive mental health, and to seek mental health support and treatment when needed. SB 224 will ensure that students receive mental health education from a qualified instructor at least once during elementary school, once during middle school, and once during high school. This education will help increase awareness, empower students to seek support, and reduce the stigma associated with experiencing mental health challenges.

We are proud to support SB 224 and to work together towards a future in which all of California's children and youth receive the mental health care that they need and deserve.

Sincerely,



Christine E. Petit, PhD  
Vice President of Public Policy and Advocacy