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Investing in youth mental health

Testimony as prepared for delivery by Policy Initiatives Advisor Tacara Lovings

MADISON – *The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction today released the following testimony, as prepared for delivery, to be provided at an upcoming Joint Committee on Finance listening session on the 2023-25 biennial budget. Gov. Tony Evers' budget proposal, released in February, [provides historic support of the state's public schools and libraries during a time of critical need.](#)*

Hello. I am Tacara Lovings, a policy initiatives advisor at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. I speak to you today as a parent, a former teacher, and a current education leader deeply invested in the lives of our children and the future of our state.

The most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Wisconsin high school students tells us this: in the previous year, 52.2 percent of students reported anxiety, 33.7 percent reported depression, 18.1 percent of students considered suicide, and 8.5 percent attempted suicide.

I know percentages can feel impersonal, so let me put this another way. I want every person in this room to take a moment and think of 10 young people you know; hold them in your thoughts while I share these numbers. Our data tells us that, out of 10 youth, five of them have anxiety, three of them are experiencing depression, two of them seriously considered taking their own lives last year, and one of them attempted suicide. This is the reality for youth in Wisconsin. We are in a youth mental health crisis.

That is why Governor Evers' budget makes a historic investment in school-based mental health by providing a funding floor of enough money for even the smallest district to hire and retain a mental health professional, with increased funding on a per-pupil basis. This is an incredible opportunity to take meaningful, necessary action to address the crisis we are facing.

Think back to those 10 youth. Why would we let them struggle alone? Who are you willing to lose? The answer is no one. But we are staring that reality in the face and we cannot look away.

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I cannot accept that. I cannot accept it for my child; I cannot accept it for the students of this state. Neither should you.

A vote for this budget is a vote to save lives. Thank you.

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