

The Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS), Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER) and Connecticut Business and Industry Association (CBIA) wish to express our deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those whose precious lives were taken at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and to the entire Newtown community.

As we reflect on the horrific events at Sandy Hook and other tragic incidents of violence in schools and public settings, we recognize that the problem underlying these situations is complex, and any potential solutions are multi-faceted.

However, we believe that addressing the issue of mental health should be at the forefront of efforts to prevent tragedies like this from occurring in the future.

As many as 20 percent of children and adolescents experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder each year (National Academy of Sciences, 2009). Despite this need for care, a majority of these children do not receive treatment, and without treatment may experience serious outcomes such as substance use, risky behaviors, violence and mental health difficulties.

Research indicates that the most effective interventions for mental health issues are those that target the natural environments of the child, and are well-integrated into the learning environment (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000). Schools, therefore, play a significant role in the intervention process.

Mental health services in schools can provide a comprehensive approach to helping children and families in crisis by addressing emotional, behavioral and developmental needs. We believe school mental health policies and programs can benefit all youth – not just those in crisis – as they promote social, emotional and behavioral health, build positive school climate, and work to prevent school violence.

But schools should not be the sole provider of services. Mental health needs of students can be extensive, beyond the capacity of schools in terms of staff training and the provision of appropriate resources for treatment. Therefore, an effective partnership must exist between and among schools, caregivers and communities.

Our state should promote collaboration among community-based mental health organizations, local law enforcement agencies, schools, and other key community stakeholders to ensure stronger, community-based mental health response and threat assessment.

An essential component of this collaboration should be finding effective strategies for preventing those in need of mental health services from harming themselves and others. Efforts to promote the many dimensions of wellness in schools – including how to address the mental health needs of students – should also be strengthened. In addition, schools should be provided the resources to employ appropriate personnel, implement necessary programs, and to establish positive and effective connections with the community.

Our associations recognize that our state – and our nation – are in the midst of uncertain fiscal times; cuts to education and social services budgets are unfortunate realities. That said, now is not the time to scale back our commitments to improving our schools and communities. We must preserve our commitments to school reforms that work and use resources most efficiently to improve student outcomes. These reforms must include educational and health-related services necessary for children to thrive. Our students need us now more than ever.

The events in Newtown are a tragic reminder for all of us; we must take care of our children. Therefore, we urge policymakers to take into account the importance of mental health services, safe schools, and violence prevention as they seek ways to prevent tragedies like this from occurring ever again.