



July 23, 2025

The Honorable Jason Lewis
Chair, Joint Committee on Education
24 Beacon Street, Room 511-B
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Kenneth Gordon
Chair, Joint Committee on Education
24 Beacon Street, Room 473-G
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Patricia Jehlen
Vice Chair, Joint Committee on Education
24 Beacon Street, Room 424
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Bruce Ayers
Vice Chair, Joint Committee on Education
24 Beacon Street, Room 473-C
Boston, MA 02133

Submitted via email

RE: Testimony regarding H.544 / S.369 An Act to Establish the Whole Child Grant Program

Dear Chair Lewis, Chair Gordon, Vice Chair Jehlen, Vice Chair Ayers, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Children's Mental Health Campaign (CMHC), thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in strong support of H.544 / S.369, *An Act to Establish the Whole Child Grant Program*, filed by Representative Decker and Senator Gomez. The CMHC is a large statewide network that advocates for policy, systems, and practice solutions to ensure all children in Massachusetts have access to resources to prevent, diagnose, and treat mental health issues in a timely, effective, and compassionate way. The CMHC Executive Committee consists of six highly reputable partner organizations: the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (MSPCC), Boston Children's Hospital, Parent/Professional Advocacy League, Health Care For All, Health Law Advocates, and the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health.

We are grateful to the Committee for its commitment to student health and wellness. Schools across Massachusetts are being asked to do more than ever to meet students' needs—not only academically, but socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. These expectations are especially challenging for school districts with high percentages of low-income students, many of which lack the resources and staffing to fully support their students' well-being.

H.544 / S.369 offers a meaningful and strategic solution by establishing a tiered per-pupil grant program to help districts meet the full range of student needs. This funding would allow schools to:

- **Hire and retain critical staff** such as school nurses, counselors, and mental health professionals
- **Provide professional development opportunities** on trauma-sensitive, culturally responsive, and inclusive practices
- **Support local initiatives to improve school climate and student well-being**, including addressing challenges like cell phone use and social media
- **Direct more resources to schools serving low-income populations**, through an equitable formula that provides higher per-pupil funding for higher-need districts

These investments are not just necessary, they are urgent. Schools are often the first, and sometimes the only, setting where children can access behavioral health services. Yet far too many districts lack the capacity to meet

increasing student needs. Educators, counselors, and school leaders are working tirelessly to support students, but they cannot and should not be expected to do so without sufficient support.

Moreover, **this bill represents a proactive strategy to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.** Without access to proper behavioral health supports, students—particularly students of color and those with disabilities—are at greater risk of disciplinary exclusion, academic failure, and eventual involvement in the juvenile justice system. Harsh and exclusionary discipline policies, often rooted in unaddressed behavioral health challenges, disproportionately push vulnerable students out of school and onto a path toward incarceration. By investing in school-based mental health resources, trauma-informed care, and supportive school climates, the Whole Child Grant Program addresses these root causes and keeps students connected to the supports they need to thrive.

By investing in the whole child, this bill advances equity and opportunity for all students. It affirms that success in school requires more than academics alone—it requires safety, connection, and mental well-being. We respectfully urge the Committee to report H.544 / S.369 favorably and support this critical investment in student wellness.

Thank you for your leadership and for your continued commitment to children's behavioral health. For questions or further discussion, please contact Courtney Chelo at cchelo@mspcc.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Courtney B. Chelo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Courtney" and last name "Chelo" clearly legible, and a middle initial "B." in between.

Courtney Chelo
Director of Government Relations, MSPCC
On behalf of the Children's Mental Health Campaign

Cc: Senate President Karen Spilka
Speaker Ronald Mariano