



**House Education Committee Public Testimony
HB 5618, HB 5619, HB 5620**

By Peri Stone-Palmquist, LMSW, MPP, Executive Director

Student Advocacy Center of Michigan is pleased to offer support for HB 5618, HB 5619, and HB 5620. These bills send an important message that every school day matters and that our children and youth deserve support and care to learn from their mistakes and make amends.

Student Advocacy Center of Michigan has been around for 40 years helping students in educational crisis find a learning path to be productive citizens. We have offices in Ypsilanti, Detroit and Jackson and helped more than 600 school-age youth around the state last school year. Many of these youth come to us because they are expelled or suspended or are facing long-term removal, so we know their stories intimately.

We have seen the power of restorative practices, as advocated in HB 5619, as well as the “lesser interventions” mentioned in HB 5618. Alternatives such as student success teams, safety checks, community service, shorter removals, counseling, letters of apology, anger management classes work to get to the true root of the problem and promote real safety in school.

I think of a recent example, still playing out today. Two African-American teens in the same school got into fights on the school bus. Not connected in any way, other than the same school. Different days, different buses. Both of them have IEPs and neither school team thought the behavior was related to the disability.

One student did not have an advocate and was removed for 180 days. She is currently falling farther and farther behind and may earn no credits this semester — a real concern because she is already so behind.

The other one brought SAC to her hearing. We urged the district to reinstate immediately and provide more support, given her fragile mental health status. As a community partner, we committed to helping her do community service, to securing mental health support and to teaching her how to write apology letters. That young woman is back in class and has been pulling her grades up. She is doing really well.

The truth is, alternatives like this are working all around the country. Many other states, such as Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida and many others explicitly encourage their districts to employ alternatives to school removal. This additional language is something we’ve been requesting for many, many years, and we are happy to see it.



I do ask that the Committee think about what else it can do. The Michigan School Justice Partnership has set forth other key recommendations that are widely supported among the county School Justice Partnership teams and align with the federal recommendations from a wide variety of bodies. These include:

- Giving school districts more discretion by removing mandatory expulsions for physical assault against another pupil, assault against school employee, volunteer, or contractor, possession of a dangerous weapon (other than a firearm), arson and criminal sexual conduct.
- Aligning state and federal law by amending the mandatory expulsion requirement for firearm to expulsion no less than a year and allowing the superintendent to modify this on a case by case basis if the modification is in writing (both in accordance with federal law).
- Adding a mandatory requirement to look at exceptions when there is a expulsion considered for weapons.

We would add that more attention must be paid to post-expulsion services. An education unlocks just about every opportunity, and all students, particularly those getting in trouble, need an education. The stats of who is most impacted by harsh school discipline are troubling. We are talking about low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, particularly mental illness, and those impacted by trauma, abuse, neglect and homelessness. These are students who need and deserve more support, not less.

School suspension and expulsion greatly increases the change of school dropout, which exacts enormous costs to society. **Schools should be required to secure a suitable alternative placement or provide a minimum of two hours of nonconsecutive hours of instruction a week until a suitable alternative can be secured.**

Finally, we want to respectfully express concern about HB 5621, which mandates reporting to law enforcement. We believe schools should continue to be given discretion about when to call in law enforcement and instead be encouraged to use trained community peacekeepers and restorative practices. Any law enforcement that does interact with schools should be trained in topics such as child development, trauma and restorative practices. Currently, we see law enforcement brought in too early and frequently, which unnecessarily escalates situations and damages school climate. We worry this mandate would accelerate the school-to-prison pipeline.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration. These are critically important issues that have had devastating impacts on thousands and thousands of Michigan students. We can and must do better. The time is now.



House Education Committee Public Testimony

HB 5618, HB 5619, HB 5620

DaQuann Harrison

Youth Facilitator, Youth Action Michigan

My name is DaQuann Harrison. I am the Youth Facilitator of Youth Action Michigan in Ypsilanti, a program of Student Advocacy Center, and a student at the WAVE program.

I am pleased to offer support for HB 5618, HB 5619, and HB 5620. I think these bills could have helped me.

In May of 2015, I officially became a victim of bullying....day in and day out 4 males who were considered "dangerous" in the school always had something to say to me or even would attempt to harm me. I began to receive house visits, threats over the phone and eventually getting my belongings stolen.

I did report what happened but nothing was taking place to bring safety and peace to the situation. The last day for seniors was approaching and word got out that 3 seniors were coming to "jump" me. I was terrified.

The building assistant told me " don't fight back because you'll get in trouble, you been doing so well that fighting wouldn't look good and chances will become slim to play ball."

So me being a fanatic for football I actually took that into consideration. But soon after that conversation I got on social media and begin to see threats towards me. The pressure got so tough for me that night I even thought about suicide so I wouldn't have to endure that pain and embarrassment the next day. All of a sudden I begin to think about my faith in God and my little sisters who needed me. So i went to sleep and couldn't sleep throughout the night and fully woke up around 5am.

I sat and thought about different steps to take but none seemed safe. So I grabbed an airsoft gun and took the Co2 air tank and clip out of it because, I didn't want anyone hurt. I was just bringing it as a "scare tactic." After I put that in my bag I thought about what if I can't reach to my bag quick enough or if they take it. What would I do then? Who would save me ?

So I went downstairs and grabbed a small 3.6 inch knife from my kitchen drawer and put it in my pants pocket and left out of my home not knowing if I was going to return home that day.....I was on the bus and began to cry quietly and thought to myself, if it's my time it's my time.



I also begin to think about what if they don't almost kill me then the trouble I would get in for these weapons. I begin to gain the courage to just toss the stuff out the window, but as soon as I reached into my bag pack it was just a little too late, the bus was already in clear view with other buses.

So I just said skip it and walked into school, just smiling to hide the pain and fear. Not even 30 minutes into the class, the door opened and the building assistants come and said, "DaQuann bring your stuff let's go."

Eventually, I was expelled for 180 days, and it's been a hard year. I'm in an alternative program, but I am having a hard time earning credit without more support. Being in an alternative program that is virtual is very challenging to remain focus. Not only is school a challenge but me being practically homeless is a very rough path for me as well.

If these bills had been law when this all happened to me, I wonder how things would have turned out differently? I feel if restorative circles were in place before I was expelled than it would have changed the outcome of my actions. I would have had the opportunity to be in a safe area with the students who were trying to harm me and resolve the issues. It became so overwhelming by trying to figure things out by myself without no help from staff or peers.

I wish "lesser interventions" have been considered, including counseling, more resources, shorter term suspension.

Although school is very tough, I'm doing very well in other areas, especially being involved with Student Advocacy Center. I was then connected with a mentoring program through SAC called "Check and Connect." I am now enrolled with two very powerful and great mentors (Anell Eccleston and Peri Stone-Palmquist). I am also an Intern with Ypsilanti Community School District, Youth Action Michigan Faciltator, Youth Voice on Washtenaw School Justice Partnership School Board, and Washtenaw County Youth Outreach Coordinator.

Now that the community has my back and best interest in heart, It's time that the school system does the same. Thank you for taking time to read my story and begining to make change.