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President and CEO

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Chairperson of MAMH Board of Directors

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November 23, 2021

The Honorable Alice Hanlon Peisch  
Chair, Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House, Room 473-G  
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Jason M. Lewis  
Chair, Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House, Room 511-B  
Boston, MA 02133

**RE: Support for H.544/S.316, *An Act to Support Healthy Development Among Preschoolers***

Dear Chair Peisch, Chair Lewis, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Education:

On behalf of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH), thank you for your leadership on the Joint Committee on Education and for the opportunity to submit testimony today in strong support of H.544/S.316, *An Act to Support Healthy Development Among Preschoolers*.

Formed over a century ago, MAMH is dedicated to promoting mental health and well being, while preventing behavioral health conditions and associated disability. We are committed to advancing prevention, early intervention, effective treatment, and research for people of all ages. We seek to eliminate stigma and discrimination and advance full inclusion in all aspects of community life. This includes discrimination affecting not only people with behavioral health conditions, but also people who face unequal burdens and barriers to the protections and benefits of citizenship due to their race, ethnicity, gender identity, or disability status. MAMH has a demonstrated track record of furthering its mission by convening stakeholders across the behavioral health and public health communities; disseminating emerging knowledge; and providing subject matter expertise.

H.544/S.316, *An Act to Support Healthy Development Among Preschoolers* requires the MA Department of Early Education and Care (DEEC) to issue performance specifications to prohibit or limit the practice of preschool suspensions and expulsions. Children from families with low incomes, Black and Brown children, children with disabilities, and children who have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are all more likely to be suspended or expelled. These children are also more likely to benefit from an early education program that supports social, emotional, and behavioral development, so the disproportionate exclusion of them is not only depriving but also discriminatory.<sup>i</sup> H.544/S.316 helps the Commonwealth fulfill its responsibility to these vulnerable children by setting benchmarks and incentivizing skill development for staff and teachers to improve the quality of early childhood education.

The experiences of children during their early years of life have a critical impact on their developing brains and have consequences both in the near term and over the lifespan. The U.S. Department of Education describes that “young students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not.”<sup>ii</sup> It is time to end these unfair and discriminatory practices, and help our children access high-quality early learning environments; evaluations and referrals to identify and address development delays, disabilities, and mental health needs; and appropriate and evidence-based social-emotional supports.

MAMH is a member of the national Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP), which works in collaboration with government, organizations, and citizens to develop trauma-informed, prevention-focused, evidence-informed policies and practices that promote a comprehensive, integrated, multi-sector approach for building trauma-informed communities. We also participate in meetings of the Massachusetts Childhood Trauma Taskforce (CTTF), which makes recommendations on how the Commonwealth can better identify and provide services to youth who have experienced trauma, and we serve on the board of Trauma Informed Hampshire County.

Young children who have experienced trauma are more likely to exhibit behavioral dysregulation and need to be evaluated and supported. Instead, too often they are suspended or expelled from preschool; the experience itself of exclusion can be additionally traumatizing. Suspension and expulsion can inhibit timely identification of traumatic experiences; mental, emotional, or behavioral health conditions; and developmental or learning disabilities. We must ensure that vulnerable children's needs are identified, that children, families, and preschool staff and teachers are provided with the supports that they need, and that children and families are connected to trauma-informed behavioral health services as appropriate. H.544/S.316 would require DEEC to develop a comprehensive strategy, beginning with a clear set of standards for all early education programs.

Massachusetts already has statutory protections in place for children in grades K-12. Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012 requires that all schools, including charter schools, comply with and revise policies to ensure that exclusion is a last resort. Schools must collect suspension and expulsion data and report to the MA Department of Early and Secondary Education (DESE), which in turn, must analyze exclusion data and follow-up when the case numbers are high.<sup>iii</sup> There is no reason why we should not have similar protections for even younger children. The importance of healthy childhood development in the earliest years of life for establishing "either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all learning, health and behavioral that follow" has been well documented.<sup>iv</sup> We can and must do best for our youngest children to foster healthy life trajectories and help them reach their full potentials.

Please do not hesitate to be in contact should you have questions, would like additional information, or if MAMH can serve as a resource to your critical work at [dannamauch@mamh.org](mailto:dannamauch@mamh.org) and [jessicalarochelle@mamh.org](mailto:jessicalarochelle@mamh.org). I urge you to report H.544/S.316, *An Act to Support Healthy Development Among Preschoolers* favorably out of Committee. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Danna Mauch, PhD  
President and CEO

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<sup>i</sup> Maryam Adamu and Lauren Hogan, "Point of Entry: The Preschool to Prison Pipeline" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/earlychildhood/reports/2015/10/08/122867/point-of-entry/>.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "Policy Statement on Suspension and Expulsion Policies in Early Childhood Settings" (Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014), available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Massachusetts Session Laws. Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012. An Act relative to student access to educational services and exclusion from school. Retrieved 22 November 2021 at: <https://malegislature.gov/laws/sessionlaws/acts/2012/chapter222>.

<sup>iv</sup> NGA Center for Best Practices, National Conference of State Legislatures, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Retrieved 22 November 2021 at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/>.