



Testimony of Rebekah Roulier, LMHC, Before the Joint Committee on Education of the Massachusetts Legislature on H516/S247, An Act to remodel public school athletics through social-emotional learning

May 2, 2023

On behalf of Doc Wayne, I am grateful to the esteemed members of the Joint Committee on Education for providing us the opportunity to share this written testimony in support of H516 and S247, An Act to remodel public school athletics through social-emotional learning. As you know, these bills would require the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to publish guidelines for the implementation of social and emotional learning curricula in middle and high school athletic programs. The proposed curricula would provide skills to coaches and student-athletes to foster safe and supportive environments.

As a Boston-based youth-focused organization working to expand opportunities and strengthen the mental health field through sport-based therapy with over 20 years of successful inclusion, and training others to include, social-emotional learning in youth sports and activities. Doc Wayne and myself Rebekah Roulier, LMHC, fully support and endorse these pieces of legislation and strongly urge this committee to advance these bills toward their enactment into law.

In recognition of the urgent need for broader access to non-traditional mental health support for youth, Doc Wayne actively works to equip teachers, youth development professionals, and sports coaches with the tools to deliver trauma-informed, social-emotional skills-based programming. These bills, if enacted into law, would greatly help address this need in Massachusetts.

Our emphatic support of these bills stems from the following reasons:

- **There is a great need to address the ongoing mental health crises in the state.** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in negative mental health outcomes for children and adolescents across the state. As an example, the Boston Children’s Hospital documented a 47% increase in hospitalizations among children due to suicidal thoughts or attempts.¹ Enacting legislation to address these crises would serve to reduce the alarming statistics in terms of suicidal ideation and self-harm.
- **Implementing social and emotional learning guidelines would serve many students across the state.** The state of Massachusetts ranked 11th in the nation in terms of sport participation by students in 2019.² The state achieved that ranking due to school athletics serving approximately 220,000 students. Thus, providing school coaching staff with the discussed guidance would allow the needs of all these students to be properly dealt with.
- **Coaches recognize the benefits of and need for such curricular support.** Data from the Aspen Institute shows a total of 67% of youth athletic coaches are interested in receiving mental health training.³ Although some coaches may demonstrate hesitancy to incorporate new methods of

¹ <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/03/25/children-suicidal-suicide-attempts-pandemic-hospital>

² <https://www.nfhs.org/media/1020406/2018-19-participation-survey.pdf>

³ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/National-Coach-Survey-Executive-Summary-FINAL.pdf>



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teaching the sporting experience to their athletes, we have found through our own provision of social-emotional learning curricula that coaching staff members appreciate being able to learn appropriate practices for helping to manage the mental health needs of their athletes. Furthermore, the provision on guidance allows coaching staff to improve the performance of their athletes by allowing them to tactfully address their mental health needs. Enacting this legislation would serve to provide coaches with the necessary tools that they are requesting.

- **Participation in physical education and sports yields countless benefits.** According to a report conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), researchers concluded that physical activity is a crucial part of preventing or reducing childhood obesity, and may also yield important academic and social benefits.⁴ Such benefits include building and maintaining physical health, improved academic achievement, and positive impacts on personal development. While youth sports participation can lead to such benefits, the GAO report also indicates that the positive impacts and effects depend primarily on the quality of the programs that sponsor them. For this reason, implementing legislation such as H516 and S247 would lead to the improvement of many athletic programs across the state.
- **The coaching staff is the first line of defense in addressing the mental health needs of student-athletes.** In many instances, coaching staff act as confidants for student-athletes. As direct mentors to the youth population, they require the training and necessary support for positively influencing the lives of the student-athletes under their purview. This view is supported by data, as having “positive mentors is proven to benefit a child’s emotional/psychological well-being,” in addition to improving their peer relationships and academic attitudes, and it can lead to a decrease in mental health issues, such as depressive symptoms.⁵

For me personally, my support not only comes from my academic training but from years of personal experience. As a former school athletics coach, I was approached by two of my student-athletes regarding serious mental health issues they were dealing with. I was someone they respected and trusted. Unfortunately, I found myself ill-equipped how to help these female athletes. It was that experience that spurred me to continue my education in counseling psychology and not only gain those skills but to be in a position to provide them to my fellow coaches, something I have had the pleasure to do for over the last 10 years at Doc Wayne. While we at Doc Wayne are blessed with the opportunity to provide skills to coaches, youth mentors, and others impacting tens of thousands of young people, you have the opportunity to advance legislation that will do the same for those impacting more than 100,000 student-athletes each year.

To conclude, we encourage the legislature to pass this legislation for the future of youth across the state. As coaches and mentors, we have a duty to young people under our care to create a safe environment where they can thrive socially and emotionally. Providing much-needed mental health training and guidance to coaches will only contribute to the health and well-being of students across the state.

⁴ GAO Report Feb 2012 School-Based Physical Education and Sports Programs.pdf

⁵ Role of Risk, 2013 (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED544233.pdf>)



Thank you so much to Committee Chair Jason Lewis and Chair Denise Garlic, and Vice-Chairs Sal DiDomenico and Steven Ultrino, and all other committee members for allowing us the opportunity to speak on this important issue. We are happy to answer any questions.

About Doc Wayne

Doc Wayne is a nonprofit, sport-based mental health service founded in 2002 that is headquartered in Boston, MA. We train coaches, clinicians, and educators to put sport and play into practice by using an evidence-informed curriculum incorporating social-emotional learning and life skills in order to provide access to brighter futures for youth around the world and strengthen the field of mental health by using revolutionary sport-based therapy and clinical initiatives -- reimagine therapy through the lenses of sport. Our mission is to provide access to brighter futures for youth around the world and strengthen the field of mental health by using revolutionary sport-based therapy and clinical initiatives to reimagine therapy through the lens of sport. A peer-reviewed study published in the Journal of Family Violence (2013) found that the Doc Wayne curriculum “had a significant positive impact on behavior and mental health in a diverse sample of adolescent girls.” The principal investigator for the study noted that Doc Wayne “stands with few peers nationwide which can demonstrate such significant impacts with this population.”

About Rebekah Conway Roulier, LMHC

Rebekah serves as Deputy Director of Doc Wayne and is a licensed mental health clinician. She has earned both an EdM and CAGS in Counseling with a sub-concentration in Sports Psychology from Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education and Human Development. She is a former NCAA Division 1 student-athlete and college soccer coach. As a coach, she holds a National Diploma from United Soccer Coaches.