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February 17, 2021

Honorable Anthony Portantino  
California State Senate  
State Capitol, Room 5050  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: SB 14 (Portantino) as introduced December 7, 2020 – CO-  
SPONSOR**

Dear Senator Portantino:

Disability Rights California (DRC), a non-profit advocacy organization that advances and protects the rights of Californians with disabilities is proud to co-sponsor **SB 14**, which would ensure our schools are equipped with the skills and knowledge to recognize and respond to mental health challenges and substance use experienced by students. This bill would also ensure that youth absences from school for a mental health issue or appointment will be an excused absence in the same fashion absences for physical health ailments or appointments are treated.

COVID-19 has increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, and exacerbated California's youth mental health crisis. The Centers for Disease Control believes that the percentage of children aged 3-17 who suffer from depression and anxiety has steadily risen this century, while also estimating that approximately 4.5 million children in that age range have been diagnosed with a mental or behavioral health challenge.

The CA Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission released a report in October, that details what one educator described as the "crisis filled lives" of children and youth. The report found that one in three California high school students report feeling chronically sad and

hopeless – and more than half of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students have reported feeling this way. Furthermore, one in six high students report having considered suicide in the past year and one in three LGBTQ students have had suicidal thoughts. The report also found that racial, ethnic, and cultural disparities concrete the risk factors, prevalence rates, and service gaps in low- income communities of color. COVID-19 has increased these gaps and disparities as our students struggle to transition to hybrid learning environments.

SB 14 is critically important given the current crisis in youth mental health in California. This bill provides students with an additional way to take initiative and care for their mental health without fear of further stigmatization and additionally provides adults with tools to support their students.

Please contact me if you have any questions about our position or if I can provide any further information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sawait Seyoum". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sawait Seyoum  
Senior Legislative Advocate  
Disability Rights California