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Dear fellow advocates for NJ children:

I am writing to share my strong concerns about the proposed transition of mental health services to students in our schools that is planned by DCF, known as NJ4S. Not only does the proposed plan likely offer more harm than help to our students and their families, but it seems an inefficient use of monetary resources in this domain.

As a school psychologist in Monmouth County, I was not fortunate to have school-based youth programs in my district, but I could turn to The Source at Red Bank Regional High School. This long-standing, highly effective program was always ready to advise me and help me find the resources I needed for my students. This support beyond their own campus came in addition to the consistent interventions made available to RBRHS students and their families daily. It is a model for other districts (and DCF) to follow, and ending its funding would, I firmly believe, place students at risk of harm.

While I applaud DCF and the state of New Jersey for seeking to expand school-based mental health services throughout the state, the proposed plan as currently fashioned does not seem to be the best way to proceed. First, the Tier 1 services of assemblies and workshops regarding bullying and mental health are a duplication of effort and inefficient use of funding as such efforts are already a part of our schools' offerings to students, either by requirement or voluntarily by Guidance or Child Study Team staff. NJ4S funding is better directed into actual mental health services for students. This is what Tier 2 of NJ4S rightly includes. Tier 3, however, puts us back where we are without school-based services. We already know that affordable, conveniently located, and timely counseling options outside of school are incredibly difficult to find for our students. The proposal of 15 "hubs" serving "one or more counties" does not appear to ameliorate this deficit and adds administrative layers that would likely consume funding needed for direct services.

What we need is what The Source at RBRHS and programs like it provide now – direct and immediate supports and interventions for students in a safe and convenient place, which is already familiar and comfortable for families as well. I hope these concerns will be considered by DCF as they undertake this critical expansion of support to our students here in NJ.

Thank you for your focus on student mental health.

Sincerely,

Mary Logan Foard, Ph.D.