From parents and friends, to teachers, classmates and, of course, the young people themselves, suicide among youth is a problem that affects everyone. Unfortunately, many educators, who spend most of the day with young people, are unable to help their students in such difficult times. School personnel are often unaware of the warning signs, unable to recognize them, or ill equipped on how to handle the situation if they do happen to notice something. In short, teachers are unprepared to deal with students suffering from depression with suicidal tendencies. Bill H.4013: An Act relative to suicide prevention training in schools directly seeks to change this problem. The bill would mandate two hours per year of suicide prevention training programs in schools as part of teachers’ professional development in order to prepare and train them on how to handle suicidal and depressed youth.

The Bill
H.4013: An Act relative to suicide prevention training in schools

Excerpt from Storybook
Jen Kelliher works for the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention. She recounted a story that she heard:

“There was suicide prevention training in school district where there had been a suicide and because of that training, faculty noticed that one of the kids was acting off. He was giving possessions away. The faculty called the police. That night, the police found student on train tracks and saved his life. These are life and death situations and the trainings do make a difference.”

Catherine recounts the story of what happened and how she felt when she found out that her friend had committed suicide.

“We thought it was an accident, a mistake. How could we have known? What could we have done to help her? I think each one of us felt responsible because we didn’t just...we just...
didn’t know anything, notice anything I mean. Why didn’t she tell us? Why didn’t we notice? Were we bad friends? And just...we didn’t know what to do. It felt like no one knew what to do, for us, for her, for anyone. I don’t know. I still don’t know.”

Newton South High School has suffered three suicides this past academic year. In an open community forum between parents and school personnel, a senior stood up and shared her reaction to the school’s handling of suicides.

She criticized the school’s emphasis on already identified “vulnerable” individuals because she felt that, “everyone is vulnerable. Reach out to everyone...We need to be given the tools to know what’s normal or not...We feel lost.”

### Elevator Speech

We are Brandeis University students and we are here today to talk about suicide – which is a very serious matter that is not talked about enough. We all know about the tragedy that happened in Newton – there were three student suicides in a period of four months – but we are here to tell you this is not just a Newton problem and we have to do what we can to prevent it from happening again. Sarah Sue and I...we’re students too. These are our peers, our friends, our younger siblings. And we need to recognize the signs before it’s too late. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 and 24. The number of suicides in Massachusetts is almost 3 times higher than the number of homicides. In MA public schools today, teachers are not equipped to recognize suicidal students. There is already legislation about training teachers to notice and report child abuse, and now we need to train teachers to notice when children are at risk for hurting themselves. We are advocating for Bill 4013, since we believe that Massachusetts needs suicide prevention training in schools to save children’s lives.

House Bill 4013. An Act relative to suicide prevention training in schools, proposes that as part of existing in-service training, primary and secondary school educators should be required to receive at least two hours of suicide awareness training. The training will include how to identify and refer students to appropriate services in school and outside of school. Teachers can independently complete the training through self-review of materials.

And we know that programs like these work. 19 other states have passed similar bills with successful outcomes. Even in MA where some schools have voluntarily implemented training programs success has been seen. Jen Kelliher of the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide prevention recounts a story in which, “There was suicide prevention training in school district where there had been a suicide and because of that training, faculty noticed that one of the kids was acting off. He was giving possessions away. The faculty called the police. That night, the police found student on train tracks and saved his life”

Will the representative speak with the chair of the Committee on Health Care Finance and report the bill out favorably?

### Letter to the Legislator

My name is Nikki Friedman and I, along with my colleague Sarah Sue Landau, am a student, of Brandeis University and residents of Waltham. I am writing you because I am concerned about the lack of understanding regarding recognizing the signs of suicidal youth. In light of what has happened in Newton this past academic year, this issue is more urgent than ever. Suicide is always preventable, but without an ability to recognize the signs, children slip through the cracks. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 15 and 24 years old, not to mention the fact that in Massachusetts, there are almost three times as many deaths by suicide as there are by homicide. This is why I am writing to you asking for your support with House Bill 4013: An Act relative to suicide prevention training in schools. By supporting this bill, you can actually help save lives.

Children spend most of their time during the day in schools, teachers, administrators, and other educators are in a prime position to spot changes in personality or other warning signals. It is therefore important, critical even, that they are trained in suicide prevention and to actually recognize these warning signs. The bill itself proposes to mandate two hours of suicide prevention training as part of professional development in schools. The training will include how to identify and refer students to appropriate services in school and outside of school. Teachers can independently complete the training through self-review of materials.

Furthermore, it is evident that these trainings work. 19 other states have already passed laws like this one, and studies done on the programs in states like Connecticut and Georgia have already proven to reduce suicide among students. In Massachusetts itself, where there have been schools that have voluntary implemented suicide prevention training programs, there have been similar successes. To quote Jen Kelliher of the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention as she recounts a success story, “There was suicide prevention training in school
district where there had been a suicide and because of that training, faculty noticed that one of the kids was acting off. He was giving possessions away. The faculty called the police. That night, the police found the student on train tracks and saved his life."

I understand you may be concerned about the practicality of a bill like this, but know that it is not a divisive issue. Everyone wants to prevent the tragedy of suicide among youth, especially the teachers. Some may be concerned about placing yet another professional mandate on the heads of the schools, but the language of the bill allows for teachers to attend already established training sessions or online programs that will not force yet another mandate on the heads of the school boards. If your concern is financial, those same, already established or online programs are of no cost to the government, and if there does need to be a budgetary allocation for bringing in a new program or training, what is the cost of that compared to the value of saving the lives of countless children?

Representative, I implore you to speak with the Chair and members of the Committee on Health Care Finance and ask them to make this bill a priority and vote it out of committee favorably. Thank you.

### Op-Ed

When it comes to suicide nobody knows what to do and that's scary. Sure, that's an exaggeration – there are experts and medical professionals who know what to do. But no layperson knows what to do and that's a huge problem – especially because training can be so easy to get. When young people commit suicide everyone panics – but if you train the people who that young person comes in contact with every day, people like teachers, then you can stop the panic and maybe even stop the suicide.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 to 24. In Massachusetts suicides are nearly three times more common than homicides. And in spite of this, it takes a tragedy for people to even begin to talk about it. That's what happened in Newton when three students took their own lives in the last academic year between October and February. That's what is happening all over the state, and the country. And that's what happened to me.

Several years ago, my friend Kat, a girl who was fast becoming one of my closest friends, committed suicide. None of us had seen it coming. I know everyone says that, but it's true. Kat was one of the brightest, happiest people I knew, or at least, thought I knew. I can remember the night she died – me and three other of our friends were going to see her, but when we got to where she lived there were police cars and an ambulance. We weren't told anything, we were just shuffled into a room and told to wait. Several hours passed, we found out she had been in the shower. I thought she had slipped and fallen. I thought maybe she had cracked her head, needed surgery. I thought we might need to go spend the night in the hospital with her. But I never thought she was dead, let alone that she took her own life. When the four of us were finally told none of us could breathe. We couldn't move. And then suddenly we started crying, and didn't stop. Not for days. We called the rest of our friends. We didn't know why she did what she did, and we never would. We were scared and confused – no one was really telling us anything, and we didn't even know the questions to ask. This is the panic. We didn't know she was suicidal, and I don't think anyone did. This is the unpreparedness. Because it wasn't just us who didn't notice. None of her teachers were able to identify the signs. Nobody around her – even people who saw her every day – could recognize that there was something wrong.

But if our teachers had been trained in recognizing the signs of suicide they probably would have, even if she put on a brave face for us, her friends. It hurts every day – to have been left behind and have no answers. It hurts to think that maybe I could have done something, or maybe someone could have done something, if only anyone had known or noticed. I miss her, and at this point, there's nothing I can do.

So what's the point? What can be done to prevent this from happening to other kids? To keep other people from being left behind, confused, scared, like I was, like the students in Newton are? To save the lives of students who are thinking of taking their own? We can train. Suicide prevention training initiatives are effective when they are implemented. By training the teachers, administrators, and all school personnel in suicide prevention methods and research, the education of the general community can be improved and students’ lives can be saved. Between the ages of 5 and 18 students spend the majority of their time at school, so it makes the most sense to train the people who see them the most, who are most likely to recognize signs of depression and suicidal thoughts.

These goals can all be accomplished with a bill currently in the Massachusetts Legislature: H.4013 – An Act relative to suicide prevention training in schools. This will enable the training of all school personnel in suicide prevention issues. So please, contact your local representative and senator. Tell them you support the bill, and that they should too. Because that's how to save a life.
Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Nikki

One of the most important meetings I attended was also the very first meeting I attended: the open hearing at Newton South High School in February. It had only been a week or so after the third student suicide that Newton had seen since October, and they held an open forum at the school. A large portion of the town of Newton was there – particularly students and parents of the students at Newton South, as well as most of the school board and administration and several psychologists, specialists from the Riverside Emergency Services, and members of the Samaritans [part of the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention].

For the first bit of the meeting, there was a large talk in the auditorium for everyone. Here, the principal of the school spoke, as did the superintendent about the tragedy of suicide and how it had affected their school. Then the Psychologist and Specialist from Riverside Emergency Services spoke about suicide more clinically, but also about what can be done to prevent it, and resources that are available to everyone now post-tragedy, and in the future to prevent another one. After the large meeting, we all split off into smaller groups to talk with counselors or administrators about next steps. I went to the smaller meeting with the school board, principal, and superintendent. Most of the people present at this meeting were parents, who were angry and scared on behalf of their kids. They spent most of the meeting criticizing the administration, the pressure they put on students, the fact that their kids still had exams and tests the day after the tragedy, et cetera. But there were also a couple of students there. They had a very different perspective from their parents. They were scared too, but they just wanted information. They didn’t think it was the school putting pressure on them, and while they were worried about exams, they mostly wanted to know what was going on, and they wanted the ability to come together in their time of need.

Sarah Sue

We found ourselves packed into the over-full auditorium of Newton South High School with hundreds of grieving parents. We listened to speeches given by the school’s superintendent, the mayor of Newton, a school psychologist and a member of the Riverside Trauma Center. Each speaker stressed that the community was doing all it could to heal in the aftermath of such tragedy and how the most important thing to do is let your kids know that they can always turn to you and that they are never alone. I took notes as they spoke.

…

Although the topic of conversation for most of the night didn’t revolve around training for school personnel and although we did not speak to anyone directly at the event, I think that our attending the event was very beneficial. It allowed us to personally connect to the topic and see first hand how a suicide can affect a school and a community at large. It showed us why suicide prevention training for teachers is so necessary. Additionally, it gave us firsthand accounts to use in our storybook and bring up when lobbying to legislators. It might have been nicer if we had the opportunity to interview some of the people who attended the event (including representatives from the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention), since they were clearly knowledgeable about the topic, however, given the melancholy mood, we didn’t feel that it was appropriate.

Update

As of September 12, 2014, H.3793 had been placed in the Orders of the Day for the next sitting for a second reading.

For more information

Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention
http://www.masspreventssuicide.org/