



Mental Health: Building Positive Climates for Learning

Members of Congress Are Urged To:

- Provide \$2.55 billion for ESSA Title II, Part A in FFY 2021 to ensure educators and early intervention providers are prepared to implement evidence-based mental health interventions
- Provide \$1.6 billion to fund ESSA Title IV, Part A in FFY 2021 to support schools and early childhood programs to hire social workers, counselors, and psychologists
- Consider the mental health needs of students, staff, and families in any COVID-19 relief packages as schools begin the process of reopening, including additional costs to school districts and early intervention programs of providing those services.
- Maintain the current structure and funding for Medicaid that allows for reimbursement for IDEA services
- Support legislative policies that increase access to mental health services through private health insurance and Medicaid
- Support policies and funding for services and community interventions for children and youth who experience trauma, environmental stress, and mental health symptoms and disorders
- Support policies and funding that promote prevention and an interdisciplinary partnership among education, early childhood, juvenile justice, mental health, and community health providers to ensure the social and emotional well-being of all children and youth

ISSUE BRIEF

Background

There is growing awareness of the importance of investing in children's mental health. A whole-child approach—or one in which the academic, physical, and mental health needs of children and youth are met—supports success. In turn, this success depends on dedicated and highly trained mental health professionals working with all children from “cradle to career” who take interdisciplinary approaches to delivering mental health services across a multi-tiered system of support.

With disruptions of school and early intervention services due to COVID-19, children, youth, staff, and families will need access to mental health services provided by well-trained school and community mental health professionals now more than ever. Professionals in schools and early childhood programs who implement evidence-based mental health supports and interventions are more successful in creating environments which support learning and a sense of belonging. High-quality, evidence-based interventions delivered by trained professionals are critical to addressing the impact of traumatic experiences on development. These practices must be integrated into a system of care that is comprehensive, cohesive, and delivered in schools, early childhood programs, transition programs, and community health and mental health systems. Investment in recruiting and retaining school mental health professionals and in identifying and implementing evidence-based mental health interventions across all tiers is essential to achieving successful outcomes for all children and youth.

School Mental Health Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This year brings special challenges regarding the provision of school mental health services. As schools plan to reopen and early intervention services begin again—whether fully in-person or using a hybrid model—children and staff all are experiencing a major traumatic event. Schools and early intervention programs will need to hire additional mental health providers, collaborate with community mental health services, and train teachers, early interventionists, and administrators to identify children and youth who need short- and long-term services. An additional federal investment of targeted funds will be necessary to address mental health concerns, as good mental health is critical to academic achievement.



Recruiting and Retaining High Quality Professionals

Building a positive school and early childhood program climate requires highly skilled personnel, social workers, psychologists, and counselors. Collectively, these individuals make a difference in the lives of children and youth, resulting in positive developmental, academic, and social outcomes. In order to ensure this goal is achieved, Congress should provide \$1.6 billion to fund Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title IV, Part A in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2021 to support schools and early childhood programs in implementing prevention programs and hiring social workers, counselors, and psychologists.

A positive school and early childhood program climate results from caring communities of adults, children, and youth learning together. It also requires implementing a multi-tiered system of support, including evidence-based curriculum and intervention within a trauma-informed environment. Investment in effectively training professionals is necessary to achieve these results. Changes must be implemented to reduce the ratios of mental health professionals to children and youth and ensure professionals are specifically trained to address children's mental health.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Mental Health

Access to mental health services—screening, providing direct services, engaging and supporting families, and connecting to community-based interventions—is vital to the well-being of children and youth. Supporting and funding services for families (in addition to their children) is also critical. Policies to fund mental health services through private health insurance, Medicaid, and programmatic mental health resources (e.g., training, curriculum, sharing of best practices) are needed to create a comprehensive

system of support. In addition to community mental health interventions, educators, early intervention providers, school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and early childhood providers must acquire and use evidence-based interventions to promote children's mental health. This is especially true for children growing up in urban areas plagued by gun violence.

Professionals must collaborate and communicate with community providers (i.e., pediatricians, mental health providers) who are trained in trauma-informed interventions to appropriately address the mental health needs of children and youth and their families. This collaboration supports implementation of approaches that:

- Provide evidence-based mental health services for children and youth
- Are culturally responsive
- Are trauma informed
- Address social and emotional and mental health needs for all children and youth;
- Confront the stigma of mental health challenges
- Ensure an adequate number of professionals are trained to address the complex needs of children and youth with social, emotional, and mental health challenges

Positive outcomes for children and youth are the result of caring communities of adults, children, and youth learning together. This outcome also requires implementing a multi-tiered system of support, including evidence-based curriculum and intervention within a trauma-informed environment.