

ISSUE BRIEF: MENTAL HEALTH - Building Positive Climates for Learning

OVERVIEW

To ensure all children can learn, schools must provide safe and healthy environments that support and enhance skills essential for school readiness and academic success. To accomplish this goal, every school must have dedicated, highly qualified school mental health professionals—vital school team members available to work with all children. Professionals in schools and early childhood programs who provide these services and interventions are key to creating positive systems that support a sense of belonging and success. Without these professionals, academic and nonacademic outcomes suffer.

According to the School Pulse Panel (National Center for Education Statistics, March 2024), 58% of public schools reported an increase in students seeking school-based mental health services over the previous school year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) demonstrates the urgency of mental health challenges in schools. According to the YRBS, more than 4 in 10 students experienced symptoms of depression in the past year, and 10% attempted suicide during that same period. One in three high school students reported poor mental health in the past month. These statistics continue to indicate that children, youth, and staff need access to mental health services provided by well-trained school mental health professionals.

Behavioral and mental health interventions are critical to addressing the impact of traumatic experiences on child development and must be integrated into a comprehensive and cohesive system of care 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 identifying and implementing evidence-based mental health interventions in all tiers is essential to achieving successful outcomes for all children and youth.

Members of Congress are Urged to:

Direct the U.S. Department of Education to reinstate funding for MHSP and SMBH grants to ensure students working toward graduate degrees in school psychology, school counseling, and school social work under these grants can complete their programs and work in high-need school districts.

Provide, at a minimum, funding at the FY 2025 level for Safe Schools National Activities divided between the School-Based Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grant program and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant program to address severe shortages of school-based mental health professionals (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors).

- These grants are critical to ensuring school districts have dedicated funding to address shortages of school-based mental health professionals trained to address students' challenges.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONALS

Building a positive climate in schools and early childhood programs requires highly skilled school 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. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a minimum ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students. The American School Counselor Association and School Social Work Association of America each recommend a ratio of one professional for every 250 students. However, national ratios for all school mental health professionals are more than double those recommendations. Persistent shortages of these professionals result in a dearth of mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention services—vital lifelines for students. These shortages can be particularly devastating in underserved areas such as rural communities, where schools may be the only source of mental health services.

CRITICAL FEDERAL INVESTMENTS

Federal investments are necessary to help ensure sufficient numbers of mental health professionals specifically trained to meet the needs of all children and youth in schools and early intervention settings. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education announced the non-continuation of over 200 grants in 34 states funded through the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant (MHSP) and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant (SMBH). These grants, originally funded under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, are critical to building the pipeline from higher education training programs for school mental health professionals to high-need school districts, increasing the number of students entering and continuing in these professions. A substantial amount of federal funding has already been invested in the current cohort of graduate students, many of whom will not be able to complete their programs without MHSP and SMBH grants. The need for services coupled with the shortages of professionals indicates these grants are vital to assisting children and youth to be mentally healthy and ready to learn.

FAST FACTS ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

- 59% of public schools reported an insufficient number of school mental health professionals to meet student needs
(National Center for Education Statistics, 2024-25).
- One in six children have a mental health condition, but only half receive any mental health services.
- Nearly 20% of children aged 3-17 have a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder
(2022 National Healthcare Quality & Disparities Report).
- 16.1% of children aged 12-17 have been diagnosed with anxiety.
(National Survey of Children's Health, 2024).
- 8.9% of children aged 3-17 (approximately 5.5 million) have a diagnosed behavior problem.
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Between 2016 and 2023, the prevalence of diagnosed mental or behavioral health conditions among adolescents increased by 35% (from 15% to 20.3%)
(National Survey of Children's Health, 2024).
- In 2021, suicide was the second most common cause of death among youth aged 10-14.
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)