

Mental Health: Building Positive Climates for Learning

Members of Congress Are Urged To:

- Provide \$606 million for Safe Schools National Activities, including the School-Based Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grant and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant programs, to address severe shortages of school-based mental health professionals (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors).
- Provide \$3 billion for ESSA, Title II-A, for FY 2022 to ensure educators and early intervention providers are prepared to implement evidence-based mental health interventions.
- Provide \$2 billion to fund ESSA, Title IV-A, in FY 2022 to support schools and early childhood programs to hire school social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists.
- Provide \$300 million for IDEA, Part D Personnel Preparation grants, to increase the pipeline of well-prepared special educators and specialized instructional support personnel, including school-employed mental health professionals.
- Consider the mental health needs of students, staff, and families in any additional COVID-19 relief packages as schools continue to reopen, including the additional costs of providing those services for school districts and early intervention programs.
- 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 interdisciplinary partnerships 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

For infants, toddlers, children, and youth to experience success in school, they need strong instructional programs with caring professionals. Equally important, however, is ensuring access to high-quality social-emotional learning programs and mental health services and supports. To meet this goal, schools must have dedicated, highly qualified school mental health professionals who are considered essential members of the school team prepared to work with all children.

After the educational and early intervention disruptions of the last year, 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. Recent reports from the Centers for Disease Control indicate that there has been a 24% spike in emergency room visits for mental health issues for children ages 5-11. Professionals in schools and early childhood programs who provide evidence-based mental health services and interventions are adept at creating positive environments that support learning and a sense of belonging.

These interventions are critical to addressing the impact of traumatic experiences on development and 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 as well as 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 as Schools Reopen

As schools look ahead to the new school year and early intervention services continue, children and staff will need to deal with the trauma of the pandemic and reintegration into daily living. 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 is 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 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. A positive school and early childhood program climate also requires implementing multi-tiered systems of support, including evidence-based, trauma-informed curricula and interventions. Federal investment is necessary to ensure sufficient numbers of mental health professionals specifically trained to meet the needs of all children and youth in schools and early intervention settings.

Addressing Mental Health Needs of Children and Families

Positive outcomes for children and youth resulting from caring communities of adults, children, and youth learning together. This outcome also requires implementing multi-tiered systems of support, including an evidence-based curriculum and interventions within a trauma-informed environment.

Access to mental health services—such as screening, providing direct services, engaging and supporting families, and connecting to community-based interventions—is also vital to the well-being of children and youth. Policies to fund mental health services through private health insurance, Medicaid, and programmatic mental health resources (e.g., evidence-based training, curriculum, and best practices) are needed to create a comprehensive system of supports to ensure children and families are mentally healthy.

School mental health and community providers should be trained in trauma-informed, culturally responsive interventions and to collaborate, as appropriate, to address the mental health needs of children and youth and their families. This collaboration should include attention to the stigma of mental health challenges and ensuring an adequate number of professionals trained to address children's complex social, emotional, and mental health needs.

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