The Comprehensive Mental Health in Schools Pilot Program Act (H.R. 3549)

Introduced by Rep. David Trone (D-Md.)

The Comprehensive Mental Health in Schools Pilot Program Act, introduced by Rep. David Trone (D-Md.), would provide resources for low-income schools to develop a holistic approach to student well-being by building, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive school-based mental health programs. This would include training educators and other school staff to integrate social and emotional learning and evidence-based, trauma-informed practices into all aspects of school environments. The legislation recognizes the interaction among the social, emotional, and academic development of students, and the importance of fostering positive, equitable classroom environments.

Specifically, H.R. 3549 would create a 4-year pilot grant program to help schools predominantly serving low-income students with building their capacity to address the mental and behavioral well-being, as well as the academic, cognitive, and social and emotional development, of their students by:

- Instituting multi-tier interventions to help educators address academic and behavioral needs.
- Fostering positive learning environments.
- Using evidence-based materials to integrate social and emotional learning skills and competencies throughout all aspects of the school experience, including by providing professional development opportunities for teachers and other school staff on:
  - Integrating motivation, engagement, and resiliency training into classroom instruction.
  - Instituting racially, culturally, developmentally, and linguistically responsive teaching and providing more agency to students.
  - Understanding the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the health and development of students.
- Eradicating punitive disciplinary practices by adopting positive, restorative policies.
- Establishing racially, culturally, and linguistically appropriate trauma-informed practices.
- Building expertise among trusted adults on responding to mental and behavioral health needs.
- Hiring more school-based mental and behavioral health professionals.

Students and Educators Have Faced an Unprecedented Set of Challenges

Students from across the nation spent the last year grappling with the fallout of a global pandemic and a national reckoning on race. Parents report higher-than-normal levels of behavioral issues in their young children, and teens report elevated stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression. Many school-age children experienced social isolation, loneliness, and struggles with family financial insecurity. Others have faced unthinkable loss and severe trauma. Children and youth from traditionally underserved populations often experience an even greater impact from the pandemic. These are the experiences that students will bring with them as they begin to return to classrooms, which will affect their ability to meaningfully engage in learning.
Prior to the pandemic, schools played a critical role in the lives of students and families. For many, they were a safe space, as well as their primary source of quality nutrition and healthcare. As they reopen for in-person instruction, schools will once again become the focal point of many communities.

COVID-19 intensified the impact of disparities in access and opportunity in public education that face many students from traditionally underserved populations. These inequities, as well as unprecedented levels of pandemic-related learning loss, often lead to an understandable but exclusive focus on academic recovery. However, it will be imperative to also highlight the need to provide students with the necessary social, emotional, and behavioral supports necessary for effective learning.

The converging crises of the past 16 months provided an opportunity to reexamine how students are educated and address all dynamics of learning by integrating social and emotional learning competencies, trauma-informed practices, and principles of motivation and engagement with academic achievement. As schools “re-socialize” students who have been away from peers for many months and who will also need to adjust to new classroom environments with a variety of new safety protocols, building these skills can help students learn and cope with change, stress, instability, and trauma. At the same time, cultivating safe, positive, and healthy school climates will also be critical. A comprehensive, school-wide approach to learning and student well-being—by providing universal supports and focusing both on prevention and intervention—must be the standard going forward.

**What Can Congress Do?**

By passing the *Comprehensive Mental Health in Schools Pilot Program Act*, Congress would acknowledge the critical role that psychology plays in educating our students and the necessity of incorporating core principles of psychological science into all aspects of the learning environment. Enacting this legislation would help low-income schools ensure that their students, most of whom have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, receive access to comprehensive, school-wide support systems that are informed by their experiences. It would enable under-resourced schools to meaningfully address both their students’ learning and overall well-being, create a more equitable educational experience, and set students up for future success.
References


