The Increasing Access to Mental Health in Schools Act (H.R. 3572/S. 1811)


The Increasing Access to Mental Health in Schools Act, introduced by Rep. Judy Chu (D-Cali.), Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.) and Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.), would expand mental health services in low-income schools by supporting partnerships between institutions of higher education and local education agencies to increase the number of school-based mental health professionals, including psychologists. The bill would also incentivize providers to serve in under-resourced schools by providing student loan forgiveness to those who commit to doing so for at least 5 years.

Specifically, H.R. 3572/S. 1811 would authorize a 5-year grant program to fund partnerships between low-income local educational agencies and institutions of higher education that offer graduate-level training programs for mental health professionals. Grants can be used in a variety of ways, including:

- To educate and train graduate level school-based mental health professionals, including by:
  - Placing trainees in low-income school-settings to complete required field work, credit hours, internships, or related training, and if applicable, pay all or part of their salary; and
  - Recruiting, hiring, and paying faculty at participating institutions of higher education to increase the capacity of these programs to train graduate students in the provision of school-based mental health services.
- To diversify the school-based mental health workforce by recruiting, hiring, and retaining culturally, racially, or linguistically underrepresented graduate students.
- To increase the number of school-based mental health providers per student.
- To develop coursework that will provide graduate students with the knowledge and skills to:
  - Meet the mental health needs of low-income students and families, as well as teachers and other staff who work in low-income schools; and
  - Meet the needs of students who may be at higher risk of negative educational outcomes.

Finally, the bill directs the Department of Education to establish a program that would forgive the federal student loan debt of school-based mental health providers who have been employed for 5 or more consecutive school years by a local educational agency serving low-income areas.

The Need for Mental Health Services in Schools is Growing

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a great need for student mental and behavioral health care existed.1 As schools throughout the country shifted to virtual instruction, students became isolated from their teachers, friends, and peers, causing varying levels of trauma and emotional distress.2 A growing body of evidence shows that the mental health of children and youth has deteriorated in this environment, including among those who did not previously demonstrate signs of a mental or behavioral health disorder.3 Marginalized students, including students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students, are disproportionately affected.4
At the same time, shortages of school-based mental and behavioral health professionals continue to persist. Although the recommended ratio of school psychologists is 1 for every 500 students, the current national ratio is almost 3 times as much, at approximately 1 school psychologist for every 1,400 students. Other school-based mental health professionals, such as school counselors and social workers, face similar shortages. These access gaps are especially pronounced in disadvantaged communities. For many low-income students and families, school-based health centers were an affordable option to address students’ physical and mental health needs before the pandemic. With schools physically shuttered during the pandemic, many of these students lost access to healthcare, further exacerbating disparities in both physical and behavioral health outcomes.

As educators work to mitigate the impacts of unprecedented levels of learning loss, improving the mental and emotional well-being of all students is a critical component of achieving that goal. Schools—especially those that are under-resourced and serve high numbers of low-income students and students from communities of color—must receive more support to address these needs by increasing and retaining diverse, culturally competent school-based professionals to provide affordable services.

**What Can Congress Do?**
Responding to the growing mental and emotional health needs of students cannot just be a temporary, COVID-centered response. Instead, federal policies must be sustainable and forward-thinking. By enacting the *Increasing Access to Mental Health in Schools Act*, Congress could provide schools serving disproportionately high levels of low-income students the ability to build long-term capacity to equitably address the mental and behavioral well-being of their students, which can have significantly positive impacts on their academic development and future success. The partnerships with institutions of higher education that this bill would create will build programs to train future generations of diverse graduate-level school-based mental health professionals to meet the needs of all students.
References


