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# The Mental Health Services for Students Act (**H.R. 721/S. 1841**)

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Introduced by Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-Calif.), Rep. John Katko (R-N.Y.) and Sen. Tina Smith (D-Minn.)

The *Mental Health Services for Students Act*, introduced by Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-Calif.), Rep. John Katko (R-N.Y.), and Sen. Tina Smith (D-Minn.), would build partnerships between local educational agencies, tribal schools, and community-based organizations to provide school-based mental health care for students. The bill would also include training for the entire school community to help identify early warning signs of a crisis and prevent its escalation.

Specifically, H.R. 721/S. 1841 would provide \$200 million in competitive grants through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Project AWARE program to help schools deliver on-site mental health services by:

- Building partnerships with community-based organizations that can help students receive evidence-based, culturally appropriate mental health services at school.
- Training teachers, administrators, and support personnel, as well as families, students, and community members to recognize signs of emotional, mental, and behavioral health distress.
- Recognizing and providing best practices for the delivery of mental health care in schools.
- Formalizing relationships between community and school-based entities that support the mental health of children and adolescents in school settings.

## Shortages in School-Based Mental Health Services

Data show that children and youth experience mental health concerns at similar rates as adults, yet they are less likely to receive mental health care.<sup>1</sup> Schools are typically ideal settings for identifying students who may require mental health services and quickly providing them with necessary care and support. They can serve as environments for prevention, intervention, positive development, and regular communication with families. They are also often the only places in many communities that provide quality health care. Students, particularly those from low-income and underrepresented populations, are more likely to receive mental health services if they are offered at schools.<sup>2</sup> This makes them critical to addressing inequities in access.

However, shortages of school-based mental and behavioral health professionals continue to persist throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> As of 2018, the U.S. had approximately 37,000 school psychologists who, on average, were each responsible for 1,200 students, nearly double the recommended caseload.<sup>4</sup> For many school districts, particularly those without the resources to employ a full complement of on-site providers, community partnerships can be an extremely effective way to close these gaps in service and advance health equity, including in mental and behavioral health. Furthermore, training the entire school community—educators, students, and families—on recognizing signs of mental health concerns can help destigmatize mental illness and better address growing needs.

COVID-19 further highlighted the necessity to address these challenges, particularly in equitable ways. While nearly all students experienced some level of mental health concerns during the pandemic, certain communities—such as students learning English as a second language, students with disabilities, students from communities of color, and students who identify as LGBTQ+ are at greater risk.<sup>5</sup> As schools begin to reopen and bring students back for in-person instruction, a lack of mental health services will limit their ability to successfully meet students' social and emotional needs, provide a safe and productive learning environment, and effectively close academic achievement attainment gaps. Increasing school-based mental health services will be critical in meeting the full scope of all students' needs, as our education system adjusts to a post-COVID-19 world.

### What Can Congress Do?

As Congress continues its work to address the impacts of the pandemic, responding to increased mental health challenges facing school-aged children is vital. By taking a public health approach to mental health care, both in schools and in the community, the *Mental Health Services for Students Act* would help meet these growing needs. Additionally, because much of the funding would be directed to under-resourced schools that serve high numbers of low-income and traditionally underrepresented students, passing this legislation would help alleviate disparities in access to care.

### References

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