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Mental Health Services in Schools

Comprehensive, multi-tiered mental and behavioral health systems in schools reduce the frequency and severity of mental health disorders among students by supporting prevention, early detection, and early intervention; promoting positive school climates; and bolstering overall mental health and well-being. They are built on collaborations between students, families, community health partners, school districts, and school professionals such as administrators, educators, and specialized instructional support personnel, including school psychologists. Furthermore, comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services are critical to effective teaching and learning.

However, shortages of school-based mental and behavioral health professionals continue to persist and greatly impede efforts to ensure access to their services.¹ This has more a significant impact along socio-economic lines. For many low-income students and families, school-based health centers are an affordable option to address their physical and mental health.²

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, our nation's students have experienced varying forms of trauma and distress. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that the mental health of children and adolescents is being significantly affected, including among those who did not previously demonstrate signs of a mental or behavioral health disorder.^{3,4} This is particularly true among marginalized students, including students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students.^{5,6} Mental health concerns are now the leading obstacle to learning for both middle- and high-school students.⁷

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As educators, administrators, and policymakers work to mitigate the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic on academic achievement,⁸ 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 of color—must receive more support to address these needs by increasing and retaining diverse, culturally competent school-based professionals to provide affordable services.

ROLE OF MEDICAID IN SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Medicaid is the third-largest stream of federal funding for school-based health care services. It broadens access to physical and mental health care available to students through school-based health centers. This particularly benefits students who are less likely to have access to such professionals, including low-income students and students of color.⁹ School districts can use Medicaid reimbursement to fund health professionals, specialized instructional support personnel such as school psychologists,¹⁰ purchase and update specialized equipment, and connect eligible students with providers outside school settings.¹¹

Additionally, since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), schools are responsible for furnishing services through a student's individual education plan (IEP). Given the traditional shortfalls in IDEA funding, Medicaid can be used to pay for services described in a Medicaid-enrolled student's IEP. Medicaid also covers a broad range of medically necessary services for children under its Early and Periodic Screening, Treatment and Diagnosis benefit, including certain screening, diagnosis, and treatment services.¹²

Policy recommendations

Pass legislation to increase school-based mental health services

- **Mental Health Services for Students Act.** Expands and increases funding for existing Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants to fund a comprehensive mental health program by placing on-site licensed mental health professionals in schools.
- **Comprehensive Mental Health in Schools Pilot Program Act.** Provides 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.
- **Increasing Access to Mental Health in Schools Act.** Expands 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.
- **Youth Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Act.** Allows SAMHSA to provide direct funding to school districts for comprehensive student mental health and suicide prevention efforts.

Increase federal funding and support for existing programs

Department of Education

- **Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program, Title IV-A.** A flexible block grant that funds school districts to improve students' academic achievement, including by improving school conditions and climate through enhanced mental health services, social and emotional learning, and trauma-informed practices.
- **Safe and Supportive Schools National Initiatives.** These programs address the health and well-being of students, school safety, security, emergency management and preparedness, and mental and emotional well-being and development. This includes the School Based Mental Health Service Professionals Demonstration Grant and the School Based Mental Health Services Grant, which aim to grow the workforce of qualified school-based mental health providers.
- **Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA).** Makes public education available to eligible children with disabilities and ensures special education and related services to those children. IDEA must be fully funded as part of the annual appropriations process.
- **Full-Service Community Schools Program.** Supports the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve educational outcomes for children by providing comprehensive academic, social, and health services for students, their families, and community members, especially in high-poverty and/or rural school districts.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

- **Project AWARE.** Provides grants to increase awareness of mental health issues among students, train school personnel and other adults on students' mental and emotional health concerns, and connect students and families to needed behavioral health services.

Strengthen Medicaid-funded services

- **Oppose efforts to restrict Medicaid payments to schools for necessary services.** This includes mental and behavioral health services delivered to Medicaid-eligible children, as well as those delivered to a student with an IEP under IDEA.
- **Update CMS' guides on Medicaid in schools.** To ensure that Medicaid reimbursement can be utilized for school-based physical, mental, and behavioral health care.
- **Increase Medicaid FMAP.** To address state budget shortfalls, the Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP) should be increased to meet the growing need for physical and behavioral health services, including in schools, to eligible children.
- **Periodically review Medicaid's early and periodic screening, diagnostic, and treatment (EPSDT) requirements.** To determine whether they are being implemented successfully in support of access to prevention, early intervention, and developmentally appropriate services.
- **Oppose efforts to implement per-capita caps or block grant funding for Medicaid.**

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