



Mental Health Services in Schools

A proactive approach to behavioral health care begins with addressing root causes of health concerns before they escalate to a crisis. With the partnership and engagement of parents and families, schools play a critical role in providing mental and behavioral health care to many children, and are often key to prevention and early intervention efforts. Roughly 70 percent of children nationwide receive their first mental health services at

school and students are six times more likely to access mental health care when it is available in that setting.^{i, ii} In fact, in many communities, schools are an essential—and often the only—source of meeting the physical and mental health needs of students and families.



Mental health concerns are now the leading obstacle to learning for both middle- and high-school students.ⁱⁱⁱ Middle and high school students who report their mental health as excellent are more than twice as likely to say they get good grades in school compared with students who rate their mental health as fair or poor.^{iv}

However, many schools struggle to provide these much-needed services. In the 2023-24 school year, 58 percent of schools reported that the number of students who sought mental health services increased compared with the previous year, and less than half of public schools said that they can effectively meet students' mental health needs.^v The vast majority of states and districts across the country still do not meet the recommended ratios of school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers.^{vi} This is especially true in rural school districts.^{vii}

Schools must receive more support to meet the behavioral health needs of students, starting with the recruitment and retention of a highly trained workforce of school-based mental health professionals. Doing so will help institute comprehensive, multi-tiered mental and behavioral health systems to promote positive school climates, help prevent behavioral health conditions, and improve academic success.

Role of Medicaid in School-Based Mental Health Services

Medicaid is the top source of federal funding for school-based health services, including for mental and behavioral health. It is the fourth largest stream of federal funding for K-12 education overall. It broadens access to physical and mental health care for students through school-based health centers. This particularly benefits students who are otherwise less likely to have access to such professionals, including those from low-income families.^{viii} School districts use Medicaid reimbursement to fund health professionals and specialized instructional support personnel, such as school psychologists; purchase and update specialized equipment; and connect eligible students with providers outside school settings. Medicaid funding can also be used for services for students requiring individual support under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act.^{ix} Finally, Medicaid covers a broad range of medically necessary services for children under its Early and Periodic Screening, Treatment and Diagnosis (EPSDT) benefit, including screening, diagnosis, and treatment services.

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 grants to fund a comprehensive mental health program by placing on-site licensed mental health professionals in schools.
- **CARE for Student Mental Health Act.** Helps schools apply for federal mental health grants by permanently authorizing and streamlining existing programs and requiring additional technical assistance to potential grantees with limited administrative capacity.
- **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.
- **Expanding Access to Mental Health Services in Schools Act.** Permanently authorizes a grant program that increases the number of school-based mental health professionals, including school psychologists.

Increase federal funding and support for existing programs

Department of Education

- **Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program, Title IV-A.** A flexible formula 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.
- **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 cuts or restructuring of Medicaid which can limit scope of services.** This includes efforts to implement per-capita caps, block grants, cuts to the standard or expansion level Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP), all of which would impact access to school-based services.
- **Increase Medicaid FMAP.** To address state budget shortfalls, FMAP should be increased to meet the growing need for health services, including in schools, to eligible children.
- **Incentivize more states to update their Medicaid plans to include school-based mental health services.** This can be done in accordance with 2023 claiming guide that can assist schools in utilizing Medicaid reimbursement for school-based physical, mental, and behavioral health care.
- **Periodically review Medicaid's EPSDT requirements.** To determine whether they are being implemented successfully in support of access to prevention, early intervention, and developmentally appropriate services.

- ⁱ Atkins, M. S., Hoagwood, K. E., Kutash, K., & Seidman, E. (2010). Toward the integration of education and mental health in schools. *Administration and policy in mental health*, 37(1-2), 40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-010-0299-7>
- ⁱⁱ Jaycox, L. H., Cohen, J. A., Mannarino, A. P., Walker, D. W., Langley, A. K., Gegenheimer, K. L., Scott, M., & Schonlau, M. (2010). Children's mental health care following Hurricane Katrina: a field trial of trauma-focused psychotherapies. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 23(2), 223–231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20518>
- ⁱⁱⁱ YouthTruth. (2022). *Insights From the Student Experience: Emotional & Mental Health*. https://youthtruthsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/YouthTruth_EMH_102622.pdf.
- ^{iv} Gallup. (2024). *American youth: A generation in transition*. Gallup. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/506663/american-youth-research.aspx>
- ^v National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). *School Pulse Panel: Interactive results*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp>
- ^{vi} Hopeful Futures Campaign. (2022, February). *America's school mental health report card*. https://hopefulfutures.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final_Master_021522.pdf
- ^{vii} National Rural Education Association. (2023, November 16). *New research shows crises facing rural students, looks critically at distribution of resources*. <https://nrea.net/new-research-shows-crises-facing-rural-students-looks-critically-at-distribution-of-resources/>
- ^{viii} Panchal, N., Mudumala, A., & Rudowitz, R. (2024, April 23). *Examining new Medicaid resources to expand school-based behavioral health services*. KFF. <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/examining-new-medicaid-resources-to-expand-school-based-behavioral-health-services/>
- ^{ix} Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. (December 15, 2014). *Medicaid Payment for Services Provided without Charge (Free Care)*. State Medicaid Director Letter# 14-006. Available at <http://www.medicaid.gov/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/smd-medicaid-payment-for-services-providedwithout-charge-free-care.pdf>.
- ^x Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2023). *Delivering services in school-based settings: A comprehensive guide to Medicaid services and administrative claiming*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/financial-management/downloads/sbs-guide-medicaid-services-administrative-claiming.pdf>