

Promote Student Mental Health & School Success in the FY 2024-2025 State Budget

Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee - Article III - Texas Education Agency

Parents in Texas are worried about their children's mental health. Over the past decade, the rates of children and youth in Texas who felt hopelessness, struggled with anxiety or depression, and had thoughts of suicide have risen. When youth are struggling or experiencing trauma or stress, they are not able to engage in learning. Comprehensive mental health strategies are school-wide practices that promote the mental wellness of all students, shield students from risks of developing a mental disorder, and help students with mental health concerns be more successful in school. This can include, for example, having school counselors and school staff who are regularly trained in suicide prevention, or adopting classroom practices that reduce disruptive and unwanted behaviors, such as bullying.

While many school district are using temporary federal funding to address student mental health, that funding expires in 2024. Currently, Texas does not provide dedicated dollars to school districts for supporting comprehensive mental health strategies. **We urge lawmakers to establish and fund a School Mental Health Allotment providing dedicated funds to school districts for mental health and school climate strategies.**

The Need for Districts to Support the Mental Health of Their Students is Not New, But it Has Become More Critical Over the Last Decade

Over the past decade, rates of Texan children who have felt hopeless, struggled with anxiety or depression, and experienced suicidal ideation have been rising. In the decade prior to the pandemic, from 2009 to 2019, there was a 35 percent increase in the number of Texas high school students who reported that they attempted suicide. Before the pandemic, in a school classroom of 25 students, five were estimated to be struggling with issues of depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use disorders, or more.¹ More recent 2021 Texas data show that:

- Nearly **one in two** Texas high school students (45 percent) felt sad and hopeless for a prolonged period in the past 12 months – **a 16 percent increase from 2019 and a 53 percent increase from 2011.**
- Nearly **one in five** Texas high school students (22 percent) had seriously considered suicide, **a 15 percent increase from 2019.**
- **One in eight** Texas high school students (12 percent) attempted suicide, reversing the decline in attempted suicide rate (10 percent) seen in 2019 and returning to rates seen in 2017.²

The violence at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde in May 2022 was the latest mass trauma event to devastate an entire community and cause fear and anxiety among students, families, and educators across the state.

Mental health affects how students think, feel, act, and learn in the classroom and is connected to how well a student does in school. Trauma and stress are associated with difficulties with concentration, memory, motivation, and decision making.³ Students who are emotionally and mentally well are able to better engage in learning.⁴

School mental health strategies can help school districts:	Improve attendance and academic performance	Reduce bullying, special education referrals, and disciplinary actions	Prevent student isolation and improve teacher-student relationships
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Comprehensive School Mental Health Strategies Promote Student Learning and Wellbeing

The Legislature has passed important bills, such as HB 18 and SB 11 in 2019, that call on school districts to not only identify students in crisis and refer their families to mental health services, but also take steps to support the mental wellness of **all** students using prevention and intervention practices that are built into the school setting. Schoolwide practices promote the mental wellness of **all** students, shield students from risks of developing a mental disorder, and help students with mental health concerns be more successful in school. Examples of school mental health strategies include:

- Policies and classroom practices that reduce disruptive and unwanted behaviors — including things like bullying, substance use, and thoughts of suicide;
- Efforts to ensure school staff have the knowledge and skills to recognize when a student is struggling with a mental health concern and know their district’s protocols for providing students and families with support; and
- Efforts to help students develop skills that help them develop positive relationships with their teachers and peers, manage their emotions and behaviors, and make responsible decisions.

Services provided by The Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHAT) are an example of intensive school mental health services – the highest tier of service intended for students who have a diagnosable mental disorder and a need for specialized mental health treatment. Yet, most students experiencing mental distress do not require the level of services that TCHAT provides and will show improvement with lower-level school-based interventions, such as regular check-ins with a school counselor. **All students benefit from schoolwide practices that contribute to students feeling a sense of belonging, safety, and shared responsibility in their school community.**

Funding is Needed for Comprehensive School Mental Health Strategies

Currently, Texas does not provide dedicated dollars to school districts for supporting comprehensive mental health strategies. The Statewide Behavioral Health Coordinating Council and TEA have each indicated that no state funds are allocated directly to school districts for mental health activities. Districts are allowed to use the School Safety Allotment (SAA) on mental health-related strategies that are part of their school safety efforts. According to the Texas School Safety Center 2022 report, only 12 percent of Texas school districts used a portion of their SSA funds for mental health personnel and support; 8 percent of districts spent funds on "behavioral health services," and 13 percent used a portion of their SSA funding on "suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention."⁵ School districts should never have to choose between school safety and mental health.

School districts and TEA have relied on temporary federal funding to address student mental health. These federal grants will expire, but the need to address the trauma, grief, anxiety, and despair among students in Texas experience will continue. The federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and other federal discretionary grants – such as Project AWARE grants from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – have provided vital funding for school districts and TEA efforts to support the implementation of school-based practices outlined in both HB 18 and the safe and supportive school program outlined in SB 11. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds will lapse in 2024, and Project AWARE funding is expected to end in 2026. Without support from the Texas Legislature, many of the mental health support staff, teacher support, skill-building programming, and services that students, teachers, and families currently have access to are at risk of going away, too.

Students' and families' access to basic school mental health services — like school counselors and school staff who are regularly trained in suicide prevention — shouldn't be depend on short term and unreliable funding streams that districts must currently contend with.

Recommendation:

- **Establish and fund a School Mental Health Allotment providing dedicated funds to school districts for mental health and school climate strategies.** We recommend an investment of \$400 million over the biennium, where each school district would be given a base of \$100,000, with additional considerations given to rural schools and schools with a majority of students who are educationally disadvantaged. With this investment, Texas would join states like Ohio and Florida that have created separate and specific allotments.⁶ Creation of a school mental health allotment is a recommendation of the Select House Committee on Youth Health & Safety in the Interim Report to the 88th Texas Legislature.⁷

Districts would have the flexibility to use the funds to best fit the needs of their students and school community; however, the strategies should align with best practice school mental health guidance issued by TEA to help districts.⁸ Examples of strategies districts could use the allotment for include:

- Supporting the salaries of school personnel responsible for planning, coordinating, delivering, or monitoring comprehensive school mental health supports and services;
- Training school personnel on effective practices and district and campus procedures; and
- Contracting with community organizations to deliver prevention and intervention services.

Endnotes

1. Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. 2019-2020 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) data query. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB).
2. Texas Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) (2021). Conducted by the Texas Department of State Health Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5728d34462cd94b84dc567ed/t/63e133aabb48157ec67931b/1675703211702/2021TXH+Graphs.pdf>.
3. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Schools Committee. (2017). Creating, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed schools: A system framework. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Howard J. Osofsky, MD, PhD, Joy D. Osofsky, PhD, Mindy Kronenberg, PhD, Adrienne Brennan, PhD, and Tonya Cross Hansel, PhD (2009). "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Children After Hurricane Katrina: Predicting the Need for Mental Health Services." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Vol. 79, No. 2, 212–220.
4. Suldo, S. M., Gormley, M. J., DuPaul, G. J., & Anderson-Butcher, D. (2014). The impact of school mental health on student and school-level academic outcomes: Current status of the research and future directions. *School Mental Health*, 6(2), 84-98.
5. Texas School Safety Center. (2022) *2017-2020 District Audit Report: Findings on Safety and Security in Texas School Districts* <https://locker.txssc.txstate.edu/cfa9cdc12a7a1a2d662f68d1c91b1a21/2017-2020-DAR-Report.pdf>. The percentages indicate whether districts used any portion of their SSA funding on those particular activities. The percentages do not address the amount spent on each activity.
6. Florida Department of Education. Mental health resources. <https://www.fldoe.org/mental-health/#fund>. 9 Ohio Department of Education. (October 2021). Student wellness funding comparison guide. <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Student-Supports/Student-Wellness-and-Success/Student-Wellness-FundingComparison-Guide.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>.
7. Texas House of Representatives, Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety. (January 2023). Interim Report to the 88th Texas Legislature. https://www.house.texas.gov/_media/pdf/committees/reports/87interim/Youth-Health-&-Safety-CommitteeInterim-Report-2022.pdf.
8. Texas Education Agency. <https://schoolmentalhealthtx.org/>.