

Include Our Youngest Kids As Texas Communities Utilize New Student Mental Health Resources

A Guide for School Districts, State Agencies, Communities, and Families



There is a growing recognition that all Texas children — whether in child care, pre-k, other early elementary grades, or beyond — benefit from school-based support for student mental health and positive school climates. These efforts include helping all children develop strategies to manage frustration, anxiety, and conflict and providing more robust services to children with greater needs. Recognizing that student mental health support is key to improving academics, behavior, health, and safety, the 2019 Texas Legislature passed a number of new laws to strengthen these efforts.

This guide briefly summarizes those new laws and outlines ways to leverage them to support the mental health of our youngest students: those in child care, pre-k, and early elementary school grades. This guide offers recommendations for school districts, state agencies, and communities, first addressing schools and then addressing child care. The final section offers recommendations to families and community leaders.

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Introduction

Whether a child is in pre-k or about to graduate from high school, mental health is a critical component of a student's success in the classroom. While one student may be learning how to count to ten and the other is studying economics, both need to be able to pay attention, manage emotions, control behavior, and interact with peers and teachers in order to learn in school. That's why it is critical that schools take steps to address the social, emotional, and mental health of students across all grade levels. Fortunately, because of several exciting new laws passed in the 2019 legislative session, Texas schools have an unprecedented opportunity to support the mental health of students from early childhood to graduation.

It's important that school mental health strategies include elementary school. Mental health concerns are common among even young students. According to the most recent data available, one in six children between the ages of 2–8 years (17.4 percent) in the nation have a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.¹ Behavior problems are more common among elementary school-aged children (6–11 years old) than children who are older.² Here in Texas, we know that too many pre-k through second grade students are being removed from their classrooms for disciplinary reasons, even after a statewide ban on discretionary out-of-school suspensions in these grades was enacted. Our recent report found that the number of out-of-school suspensions in pre-k through second grade fell from 36,475 in 2015-16 to 7,640 in 2017-18, the first year after the Legislature passed HB 674.³ However, when the count includes in-school suspensions, districts still issued over 70,000 suspensions to the children in these early grades during the 2017-18 school year.

State agencies, education service centers, school districts, and communities should also seek out opportunities to build the capacity of early care and education programs serving kids from birth to age five to address young children's social-emotional development and mental health. Young children will enter school with stronger social, emotional, and behavioral skills if they have experienced quality early care and education programs before entering their pre-k or kindergarten classrooms. Behavior challenges are common in early care and education settings, as young children are just beginning to learn important developmental skills, like how to manage their emotions and behavior both on their own and in a group. Infants and toddlers can also experience mental health and developmental disorders — including anxiety, stress, trauma, mood, and sensory disorders — that interfere with their normal development, learning, and behavior.⁴

New State Laws Create Opportunities to Support Early Childhood and Student Mental Health

During the 2019 Texas legislative session, state legislators passed a number of bills that create new opportunities to support student mental health in early childhood, including the following:

- **HB 3** overhauls Texas school finance by investing an increased \$6 billion in Texas public schools. Among other reforms, it requires and provides funding for full-day pre-k for eligible students; requires high-quality pre-k standards regarding family engagement, curricula, and student progress monitoring;

and establishes new kindergarten through third grade reading standards to ensure districts are doing more to guide children to be stronger readers by third grade. As we demonstrated in our 2019 policy brief on the effectiveness of high-quality, full-day pre-k, this investment will help young students start kindergarten with the academic and social-emotional skills to succeed while boosting academic achievement in later years.⁵ Further work is needed to ensure pre-k guidelines and requirements include a focus on social-emotional development, in addition to improved literacy.

- **HB 18** establishes various training, policy, and planning requirements for school districts related to student mental health. This includes practices and procedures to create positive school climates; integrating trauma-informed practices into school settings; developing key social and emotional skills among students; and using positive behavior interventions and supports.
- **HB 19** provides schools with increased access to training and technical assistance on issues related to student mental health, trauma-informed practice, and youth substance use by having a mental health professional serve as a dedicated resource to school and Educational Service Center (ESC) staff. They would be employed by local mental health authorities but working at each of the state's 20 education service centers. They will not provide clinical services.
- **SB 11** includes provisions that require districts to establish safe and supportive school programs that use multi-tiered interventions addressing school climate, social and emotional development, and behavioral and mental health among students — an approach we recommended in our 2017 report on student mental health.⁶ SB 11 also requires school districts to adopt policies to implement trauma-informed practices and staff training, aligning with recommendations from our 2019 policy brief on trauma-informed schools.⁷ To assist schools in identifying resources, the bill also directs the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to work with ESCs and other state agencies to identify and maintain a listing of regional and statewide resources that can assist districts in creating school environments that support the social, emotional, and academic development of students; in identifying students who may need additional behavioral or mental health support before issues arise; in providing early, effective interventions to students in need of additional support; and in connecting students and their families to specialized services in the school or community when they may be needed.

Steps to Support Early Childhood Mental Health in Schools

As school districts, TEA, ESCs, and communities work to implement these new laws, there are steps they can take to ensure they are including developmentally appropriate strategies that address the social-emotional development and mental health needs of the state's youngest students.

Develop appropriate policies, practices, and guidance.

Both TEA and school districts should:

- Require threat assessment teams serving elementary campuses to have members with expertise in early childhood mental health and behavior.
- Monitor data collected by district threat assessment and safe and supportive school program teams (as required by SB 11) to determine the effects on elementary school students, particularly students in pre-k through second grade.
- Examine the use of behavior threat assessments and interventions provided to students in pre-k through second grade.
- Examine the multi-tiered support systems developed by districts for use on elementary campuses. Monitor the use of research-based strategies shown to promote safe and supportive school climates, build student skills on managing emotions and behavior in healthy ways, and support teachers with training and technical assistance on minimizing and addressing challenging behaviors among students.

Leverage funding to support strategies that address social-emotional development, student mental health, and safe and supportive school climates.

- Districts should use the new School Safety Allotment (provided under SB 11) to support strategies that promote students' social-emotional development and mental health, including: 1) increasing elementary students' access to school counselors and social workers and 2) providing educators with access to early childhood mental health consultants and/or other behavior specialists to provide more robust support for young students.
- Districts should use new early education allotment dollars (provided under HB 3) to lower pre-k class sizes and student-teacher ratios to provide more personal interaction between teachers and their students.
- TEA and the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) should provide districts with guidance and technical assistance on blending and braiding funds to support programs and services addressing young students' social-emotional development and mental health.

Increase the capacity of educators to address the social emotional development of young students.

- HHSC and ESCs should ensure mental health professionals assisting districts have training and/or experience in early childhood. This will result in more developmentally appropriate guidance and support to districts for children in the early grades. They should also investigate opportunities to leverage any guidance that is currently available to Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD) educators to help pre-k to second grade educators address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students receiving general or special education services.

- TEA should provide districts with robust guidance on addressing the social-emotional development and mental health concerns of young children, including students who are English learners and/or students with disabilities. Districts should include staff training on implicit bias in district plans and procedures to address disproportionalities that exist in student discipline and other teacher-student interactions.
- Ensure pre-k curricula and assessment practices reflect best practices to promote social and emotional health. As policymakers and districts rightly work to improve third grade reading proficiency, they must also allow children to explore their curiosity, learn to play well with others, and facilitate social and emotional skills along the way.
- Implement existing Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines regarding social and emotional development to raise the quality of teacher-child interactions. Align these instructional strategies in subsequent grades as well.

Use data to monitor disciplinary referrals of young children, identify inappropriate or prohibited use of disciplinary actions, and identify young students who are disproportionately impacted by disciplinary practices.

- TEA and districts should collect, analyze, and scrutinize data on suspensions and other disciplinary practices in the early grades to identify where targeted supports, training, and practice changes are needed at the campus and classroom level to improve child outcomes and reduce the disproportionate punishment of students who are Black, male, in foster care, or in special education.
- TEA and HHSC should identify opportunities and provide guidance to districts to work with Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) providers to ensure a smoother transition for children moving from ECI programs for babies and toddlers to needed school-based special education services.

Steps to Support Early Childhood Mental Health in Early Care and Education Programs Serving Kids Age Birth to Five

We encourage state agencies, school districts, and communities to leverage new state resources and strategies and support the mental health of our youngest Texans in child care.

Strengthen inter-agency coordination across state agencies with roles in early care and education programs to support the social-emotional development of young children.

Currently, oversight and funding of early childhood education and student mental health is spread across five different agencies in Texas:

- TEA supports funding and regulation of pre-k and elementary school
- The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) oversees and distributes child care subsidy dollars and operates the state’s child care quality rating and improvement system, Texas Rising Star

- HHSC houses Child Care Licensing and Early Childhood Intervention
- The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) oversees home visiting and other prevention programs
- The Department of State Health Services (DSHS) manages the state’s maternal and child health initiatives, including expansion of developmental screenings.

These agencies should work closely to identify ways to improve training, coordinate policy strategies, and align and share data to track outcomes. Potential opportunities include:

- Leverage the resources and lessons learned from the Texas LAUNCH project to assist early care and education programs – and even schools – to address young children’s social-emotional development and mental health concerns. The Texas LAUNCH was the product of a federal grant awarded to DSHS in 2015 to build the capacity of the early childhood workforce to address social-emotional wellness of children from birth to age eight and identify and address behavior concerns early and effectively. The program, which worked with communities in El Paso, Fort Worth, and San Antonio, ended in late 2019 but provides a model and framework that can be used to build capacity among the early childhood workforce in other regions of the state, as well as educators in pre-k through second grade.
 - DSHS, HHSC, TWC, and TEA should build on the efforts of Texas LAUNCH to develop a coordinated, statewide network of early childhood mental health consultants that can provide guidance to early childhood educators and administrators to support the emotional health of children in early childhood settings.
- TEA should work with HHSC and TWC to make any relevant information and guidance available to early care and education programs serving children age birth-to-five when appropriate. Agencies should ensure they also include local child care centers in professional development opportunities offered to district staff, where possible.
- Enhance efforts of ECI programs and school districts to ensure a smooth transition for young children transitioning into PPCD or babies and toddlers to needed school-based special education services.
- Ensure Texas Rising Star high-quality child care standards align with early childhood mental health best practices and measure the quality of social and emotional practices and teaching strategies.
- Update Child Care Licensing minimum standards to ensure required child care suspension and expulsion policies address specific teacher and staff responses to children with challenging behaviors, communication with families and caregivers prior to suspension or expulsion, and referrals to available behavioral health specialists as needed.

How Families and Community Leaders Can Inform the Process

As state agencies and school districts implement new policies and practices, the voices of families and community leaders will be essential in ensuring children are well-supported. Opportunities for families and community leaders to get involved include the following:

- Encourage school district leaders to include policies and practices that address the needs of students in pre-k through second grade when developing safe and supportive school programs and policies related to student mental health. Share with them the opportunities mentioned above to support the social-emotional development and mental health of young learners.
- Share personal stories and experiences with agency leaders, districts, and advocates to show how children have been supported by safe and supportive environments or early childhood mental health services.
- Participate in the local school health advisory council (SHAC), which informs the district on issues related to the connection between health and learning, including health education curriculum, social-emotional development, and mental health services.
- Reach out to local districts to find out about other ways to help in their efforts to create positive school climates and address mental health concerns among students.

References

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