

April 6, 2018

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Your Question:

A staff member at a state legislative office asked about what other states are doing to promote mental health in schools. Specifically, you are interested in how states are supporting schools as they support students and provide opportunities to get help.

Our Response:

[Research suggests](#) that school-based mental health services play an important role in supporting student mental health. As states have worked to provide greater access to these services, we have observed policy action in four main areas:

- Providing for school based mental health professionals.
- Creating greater awareness of mental health issues through curriculum and staff training.
- Introducing trauma informed practices.
- Incorporating social and emotional learning.

These areas are described in more detail below. Under each issue area, we have included relevant state policy examples.

School Based Mental Health Professionals

According to an analysis conducted by [Education Week](#), nearly 3 in 10 pre-K-12 schools have no school counselor. The American School Counselor Association published a [brief](#) in 2015 outlining the school counselor's role in supporting student mental health. The brief states that "although school counselors do not provide long-term mental health therapy in schools, they provide a comprehensive school counseling program designed to meet the developmental needs of all students."

A white paper from the National Association of School Psychologists, [School Psychologists: Qualified Health Professional Providing Child and Adolescent Mental and Behavioral Health Services](#), includes recommendations on how to utilize school psychologists as mental health service providers in schools. The white paper also includes a list of mental and behavioral health services that may be provided by school psychologists

State Initiatives and Policy

Several states have recently devoted many resources to increasing the availability of school-based mental health professionals, including school counselors, school social workers and school psychologists. To our knowledge, most of the states engaging in this work have increased funding—through state grants and private foundation funds — for improved staffing capacity.

- **Increased Capacity:** The [Colorado School Counselor Corps](#) grant program awards funding to increase the availability of effective school counseling. The program has been in place since 2010 and has benefitted 365 secondary schools in 98 districts. More than 270 licensed school counselors have served in various capacities throughout the state through the grant program. This [legislative report](#) outlined the return on investment of the program and this 2016 document on [lessons learned](#) provides valuable insight into the implementation of the program.
- **Increased Capacity:** In 2016, [Minnesota](#) increased the capacity of school counselors, social workers and psychologists in 77 schools by providing \$12 million in state grants.

- **Referrals:** [Tennessee HB 720/SB 341](#) (2017, enacted) allows a school counselor to refer or help facilitate the referral of a student to a private counselor or therapist for mental health assessments or services, after a parent’s written request for such a referral. The bill provides that neither the local education agency nor the school counselor shall bear the costs of the mental health services provided under the referral.
- **Reporting:** [Texas SB 490](#) (2017, enacted) directs the Commissioner of Education to promulgate a rule requiring school districts and open-enrollment charter schools to report information regarding the availability of school counselors at each campus. The bill also requires district boards to include the number of counselors providing counseling at each campus in their school district annual education performance reports.

Mental Health Awareness

Educating students and teachers about mental health can simultaneously counteract stigmas associated with mental health concerns and increase knowledge of helpful resources and intervention strategies. Below, we review state policies that provide students with mental health education and school employees with early identification training.

Curriculum

- [Virginia HB 1604](#) (2018, enacted) directs the board of education to review and update the health standards of learning for students in grades nine and 10 to include mental health. The standards must recognize the multiple dimensions of health by including mental health and the relationship of physical and mental health to enhance student understanding, attitudes and behavior that promote health, well-being and human dignity.

Staff Training

- [Maine HP 929](#) (2017, enacted) requires **mental health first aid training** for health educators. The recipients of training must also receive training to safely de-escalate crisis situations, recognize signs and symptoms of mental illness and to refer students to mental health services in a timely manner.
- [North Dakota SB 2038](#) (2017, enacted) creates a task force on children’s behavioral health tasked with guiding efforts to ensure a full behavioral health continuum of care is available in the state. Reporting is required every six months. The bill also amends requirements for school districts to provide a minimum of 8 hours of **professional development on behavioral health** every two years. Behavioral health includes trauma, social and emotional learning, suicide prevention, bullying, wellness, knowledge of symptoms and risks, awareness of referral sources and intervention strategies.

Additionally, positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) programs can help provide a positive and supportive environment for all students. The [American Psychiatric Association](#) provides a brief introduction to PBIS program examples.

Trauma Informed Practices

Research suggests that childhood trauma and chronic stress, often a result of [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs), negatively affects students’ ability to learn and focus in school. Among children aged birth to 17 years, [approximately 46 percent](#) have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience. Research indicates that a [greater number of ACEs](#) are related to poorer well-being. In recent years, education leaders have started to focus on how to mitigate the negative effects of childhood trauma by implementing requirements around trauma-informed schools. While many of the efforts to develop trauma-informed schools have taken place at the local level, there has been some movement at the state policy level in recent years.

- [Massachusetts’ ‘Safe and Supportive Schools’ law](#), developed out of the passage of [HB 3528](#), required all schools to develop **action plans** for creating safe and supportive environments using a prescribed assessment tool and framework. The bill also established a commission to assist in implementation, established a grant

program to fund model schools and provided for technical assistance to schools and districts. Trauma-sensitivity within schools is a key aspect of the framework.

- [Vermont H 23](#) (2017) Requires the Secretary of Education to develop a plan for creating a **trauma-informed school system** throughout Vermont in consultation with representatives from the state’s Principal’s Association, Superintendents Association, School Boards Association and National Education Association. The plan is required to link school nurses with primary care providers in the community and must include mechanisms for coordinating trauma-informed resources through the system and measuring results. Additionally, this bill mandates the creation and dissemination of **training materials** for prekindergarten teachers regarding the identification of students exposed to ACEs. The training materials are required to include information on how prekindergarten teachers may refer families with students exposed to ACEs to a community health team. Additional information trauma informed care in Vermont schools can be found at the department of mental health’s [website](#).

Social Emotional Learning

A growing body of [research](#) shows the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a part of students’ development. [CASEL](#), the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, is a leading organization for promoting SEL standards. SEL can help students build self-awareness and positive relationships and feel and show empathy for others. Key SEL competencies are outlined in this [brief](#). Competencies include:

- Awareness of others.
- Positive attitudes and values.
- Responsible decision making.
- Social interaction skills.

Many states have incorporated SEL into their education standards, often linking SEL to health education. For example, [Colorado’s Comprehensive Health Education Standards](#) include sections on emotional and social wellness. Some states have also emphasized the links between health, SEL and suicide prevention in their state policies and health education standards.

Washington has developed thorough [health and physical education standards](#) that include social and emotional learning, and connect the concept to several risk factors, including bullying, stress management and body image. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction maintains [resources](#) for schools to develop and implement suicide prevention plans, including an explanatory table of enabling legislation.

Additional Policy Examples

Education Commission of the States tracks and summarizes state legislation related to all these issue areas in our [State Education Policy Tracking database](#) (for bills enacted in 2017 and 2018) and [here](#) (for bills enacted between 1996-2016).