



HOW MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS IMPACT STUDENTS' SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT (SEAD)

By Blair Wriston, senior government affairs associate, Nancy Duchesneau, senior P-12 research associate, and Manny Zapata, research and policy intern

What are Mental Health Supports?

Mental health supports for students refers to a broad range of wraparound services and interventions provided by schools to support students' social, emotional, and mental well-being. These supports, which range from access to mental health professionals, such as [school counselors](#), psychologists, social workers, and nurses, to needs assessments and family-based interventions, are essential to students' success in school and life.¹ The [most common services](#) offered in schools include individual-based interventions like one-on-one counseling or therapy, case management or coordinating mental health services, and referrals for care outside of school.² Mental health screenings for all students, which are considered a best practice because they allow for schools to better identify and tailor services to all students with needs, are less common, with only [a third of schools](#) providing these outreach services.³ Students who have access to high-quality, holistic mental health supports in schools are [not only](#) healthier physically, but are also [more likely](#) to graduate from high school and successfully complete postsecondary education.⁴

Additional practices such as multi-tiered or integrated systems of support ([MTSS are frameworks](#) districts and schools can use to connect services to students by providing a structure for identifying students' needs and providing targeted supports to each student. Additionally, ensuring educators have professional development in recognizing signs of mental health issues and supporting students from diverse backgrounds can ensure students are more quickly and appropriately referred to mental health resources. Beyond the programs and interventions specifically designed to support mental health, schools must also create emotionally supportive and culturally affirming environments for all students, which in turn support students' mental health. Evidence-based policies and practices that create physically, mentally, and identity-safe and inclusive learning environments ensure students can build relationships, have spaces where they can feel safe and a sense of belonging, and positively develop socially, emotionally, and academically.

The Impact of Student Mental Health Supports

Access to high-quality, culturally responsive mental health supports in schools is critical to students' long-term growth and development. For example, not only can these services help to [improve](#) a student's physical and mental health by providing crucial prevention, early identification, and early intervention services, but they can also help teach students important life skills, including effective communication and conflict resolution, which are essential to building a sense of trust, safety, and belonging. In doing so, these services can also be a key factor in both improving school safety and in ensuring students experience positive learning environments, which can further [improve academic outcomes for students](#), particularly for students who struggle the most with academics.⁵

While the benefits of high-quality mental health supports in schools are felt by all students, these services can be particularly impactful for underserved students, who are least likely to have access to mental health supports outside of school. Black children are more likely to receive [inadequate mental healthcare as a result of systemic racism and abuse within the healthcare industry](#).⁶ For example, Black youth are more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system, while White youth are [more often referred to mental health treatment](#).⁷

Schools need to help address these disparities because schools are the place where students are most likely to first be recognized as needing mental health support. According to 2020 data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Black students are nearly 600 times as likely to get mental healthcare in an academic setting compared to other options.⁸ Similarly, school-based mental health supports can be particularly impactful for students in rural communities because schools are often the only source of mental health services in the area.

Disparities in Access for Underserved Students

The need for comprehensive, culturally responsive, and evidence-based mental health supports in schools has never been greater.⁹ Mental health challenges have increased during the pandemic, with findings [from 2021](#) showing:¹⁰

- 37% of students in grades 9-12 reported experiencing poor mental health
- 1 in 5 students seriously considering suicide
- 1 in 10 attempting suicide

Furthermore, the need for high-quality mental health supports in schools is particularly significant for underserved students, including students of color, who often face a unique and challenging set of external social and economic factors. According to a 2019 [report](#) from the Office of Minority Health, suicide was the third-leading cause of death for African Americans aged 15 to 24, and Black girls in high school were 60% more likely to attempt suicide than their White peers.¹¹

Behind these shocking statistics are real kids: Millions of students across the country, especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities, lack access to critical school-based mental health services that support their holistic needs. One of the most significant challenges to students' mental health and well-being is a lack of access to mental health professionals in schools. For example:

- According to [recent](#) data, the national average ratio of students to school counselors is [408:1](#), despite the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) recommended ratio of 250:1.¹¹ Only two states – New Hampshire and Vermont – are at or below the recommended level, whereas some states, such as Arizona and Indiana, have levels close to 700:1;
 - In 2020-21, only [14 percent of districts](#) met the recommended ratio of students to school counselors, and nearly 40% of districts did not have a single school psychologist, affecting nearly 5.4 million students.
 - The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a student to school psychologist ratio of 500:1, but the national [average is 1,127:1](#)¹²

Disparities in access to school-based mental health professionals are particularly severe for underserved students, including students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, who are often [shortchanged](#) by states and more than three times as likely than their White peers to [encounter more law enforcement in schools](#) than trained [mental health professionals](#).¹³

Suffice to say, school counselors matter. In addition, [findings show](#) that positive relationships and connections with peers and adults in school can protect and improve students' mental [health](#). However, schools serving large populations of students of color and students from low-income families often lack the resources necessary to create identity-safe learning environments in which students can build these positive relationships, and results show that more than half of [Asian, Black, and multiracial students experience racism](#) in schools, which also makes it less likely for these students to have strong relationships in school.¹⁴ Adults serving these populations therefore need to offer more mental health resources and more training in building relationships with diverse student populations. What it boils down to is schools serving students of color and students from low-income backgrounds [need more funding](#) — not equal, and certainly not less, as has been the case with decades of disinvestment and underinvestment in schools predominantly serving students of color.¹⁵ Furthermore, while the federal government has provided increased funding through the American Rescue Plan Act, lower-income schools and schools in rural areas are [less likely to use these funds toward school-based mental health services](#) than their higher-income counterparts.¹⁶

Disparities in access to school-based mental health services for underserved students are part of larger, systemic inequities in access to critical mental healthcare for communities of color. These communities often face a variety of [barriers](#) accessing high-quality healthcare, including an absence of racially or ethnically diverse providers, a lack of culturally competent services, underinsurance or absence of insurance, a [higher likelihood of misdiagnosis and poorer quality of care](#), and a greater tendency to be incarcerated rather than provided support for mental health conditions.¹⁷ As a result, communities of color face significant challenges requiring a broader policy approach to address the mental health needs of these underserved communities.

Supporting Mental Health Beyond COVID-19

Despite our nation returning to pre-pandemic operations, the long-term effects of COVID-19 on students' mental health and well-being remain severe. Whether it be the [devastating impact of losing a family member or caregiver to COVID-19](#), or the disruptions to relationships, schedules, and learning environment as a result of months-long quarantines, students have experienced increased stress, social isolation, and anxiety.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the pandemic only exacerbated longstanding inequities; many students across the U.S. — particularly students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities — have suffered from a lack of access to critical mental health supports, such as school psychologists, school counselors, or social workers. To help students recover from the lasting effects of the pandemic, school leaders must not only ensure access to high-quality mental health professionals for every student, but must also equip educators with evidence-based approaches that support students' holistic development and create safe, healthy, and inclusive learning environments.

The Role of the Federal Government Regarding Mental Health

Mental health supports in schools are impacted by policies at all levels — federal, state, district, school, and even in individual classrooms. The federal government plays an integral role in supporting the social, emotional, and academic needs of our nation's students. Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and other federal entities can help support states and districts in the development of high-quality, evidence-based mental health supports in a variety of ways:

1. The federal government must continue to urge states and districts to spend funds to provide critical mental health services to students. When President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan (ARP)* into law in March 2022, among its many provisions, it made consequential investments in a [variety](#) of mental health provisions that support student's social, emotional and academic development, such as:
 - Billions of dollars in relief funding to help ensure comprehensive mental health care for childcare and early education, including Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants, which provide a variety of mental health services for underserved communities.
 - The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund, which has been key in hiring school counselors and increasing supports for K-12 students. According to the Department of Education, the number of school social workers was up 54% in 2022 because of ESSER funds, and the number of school counselors was up 22% compared to pre-pandemic levels.

**While education leaders have used ARP funds in ways that have had a powerful impact, billions of dollars of ARP relief funding remain unspent by states and districts. Students cannot wait, and the federal government must continue to urge states and districts to spend these critical funds to provide important mental health services.*

2. The federal government must prioritize evidence-based programs and investments that support safe, healthy, and inclusive learning environments for students. In June 2022, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act was signed into law, which, among other provisions included significant funding for several existing mental-health related programs in schools. Specifically, the legislation included:

- \$800 million for existing programs under SAMHSA, including the Community Mental Health Services Block grant, which provide community-based mental health services
- Project AWARE, which provides competitive grants to identify children in need of mental health supports, and to increase treatment options and mental health literacy within schools
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which provides immediate crisis counseling and referral services to individuals experiencing mental distress
- The School-Based Mental Health Services Grant and the Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grant, which both aim to increase access to and the quality of mental health services in high-need districts

As the Departments work to distribute the crucial funding provided by the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, it is essential to [prioritize the mental health needs of underserved students](#), particularly students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities.¹⁹

3. Congress should prioritize investing in supportive personnel such as school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and others — including investing in programs that address pipeline shortages of supportive personnel — as well as in healing-centered and restorative practices. This would not only help improve student mental health, particularly for underserved students, but it would also [increase school safety](#). To ensure that all students have access to a safe, healthy, and inclusive learning environment, Congress should immediately pass the following bill:

The Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act (formerly [H.R. 4011/S. 2125](#)), which prohibits the use of federal funds to support the hiring, recruitment, and placement of police officers in K-12 schools, and establishes a grant program to invest in school districts that replace law enforcement with adequately trained personnel and trauma-informed services.²⁰

Is Your State Prioritizing Mental Health Supports for Students?

State leaders can help districts and schools provide high-quality mental health supports for students, help create clear goals, and adopt evidence-based guidance for best practices in the classroom. State leaders can also ensure that schools provide community-based wraparound services to support students and communities. While some states have made impressive efforts in providing robust wraparound services and mental health supports for students, many states fall short in a variety of key areas.

Building on Ed Trust's 2020 seminal [report](#) titled, *Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through and Equity Lens*, Ed Trust released in 2022, in partnership with CASEL, [Is Your State Prioritizing Social, Emotional, and Academic Development](#), a web tool that includes a 50-state scan to evaluate how states integrate efforts to holistically support the social, emotional, and academic needs of students in their policies to provide wraparound services, as well as four other key policy areas: ²¹

- Professional development
- Rigorous and culturally sustaining curriculum
- Student, family and community engagement
- School discipline

Educators, advocates, and policymakers at all levels of government can use the 50-state scan to evaluate how their state's policies in providing wraparound services compare to other states in creating safe, supportive, and inclusive environments for students that meet the mental health needs of students, by examining nine key criteria for positive approaches to wraparound services.

9 Ways States Can Improve Mental Health Supports

While the most obvious first step is ensuring that every student has access to high-quality mental health professionals in the classroom, there are a variety of ways to support students' mental health and wellbeing. State leaders who are committed to investing in essential wraparound services that foster a healthier, safer, and more inclusive school environment for students, particularly students of color and students with disabilities, should prioritize these nine criteria:

1.	Explicitly include multi-tiered or integrated system (MTSS) goals in the strategic plan or ESSA plan and explicitly prioritize students with the highest needs in developing and implementing MTSS. Example: California ²²
2.	Establish a commission (e.g., Children's Cabinet, Office of Integrated Student Services, or similar counterpart) with a clear initiative of advancing race equity to coordinate interagency services for children and youth. Example: Oregon ²³
3.	Develop guidance for districts and schools to develop and fund evidence-based MTSS. Example: Ohio ²⁴
4.	Establish policies for districts to provide health and housing supports, including authorizing the use of Medicaid for health services delivered to any Medicaid-enrolled student; state-level resources for providing oral health supports to students; and disseminating information about services for students experiencing homelessness. Example: New Hampshire ²⁵
5.	Establish policies for districts to ensure equitable and inclusive learning and extracurricular environments, including comprehensive anti-bullying policies that underscore groups of students (based on race, sex, gender expression, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.), and policies supporting transgender K-12 students in participating in athletics and using facilities (e.g., bathrooms and locker rooms) based on their gender identity. Example: Washington ²⁶
6.	Require districts or schools to monitor the progress and impacts of MTSS models and approaches for continuous improvement, as informed by student data. Example: Washington ²⁷
7.	Mandate each school has a specified and adequate 250:1 student-to-school-counselor ratio, as defined by the ASCA and provide at least partial funding for districts to meet the requirement. Example: Delaware ²⁸
8.	Require districts to conduct student-level needs and strengths assessments, and school/system-level needs and strengths assessments, to identify the supports currently available in schools and communities, and where gaps exist. Example: Washington ²⁹
9.	Require districts to measure and report the fidelity of implementation of MTSS. Example: Vermont ³⁰

Implementing Mental Health Supports at the Local Level

For many young people, school is the primary provider for mental health resources and where mental health concerns can first be detected. Mental health support services in schools are critical to ensuring the success and support of students of color. [Research](#) shows that these efforts must be approached with a racial equity lens, recognizing not only that students of color are likely facing disproportionate stress and trauma right now in comparison to their White counterparts — but also that not all students of color have the exact same mental health needs.³¹ Addressing mental health concerns and crafting strategic interventions rectify the disproportionate outcomes students of color face across several social, emotional, and academic indicators.

For actionable guidance, district leaders can use the toolkit from the [Alliance for Resource Equity \(ARE\)](#), a partnership between Ed Trust and Education Resource Strategies.³² ARE has developed a series of tools and guidebooks that outline specific actions to create a more equitable student experience, starting with ARE's [diagnostic tool](#) that identifies areas for growth in a district's current policies and practices.³³ Then, district leaders can reference the [ARE guidebook on creating a positive and inviting school climate](#) that demonstrates how to further these goals. In particular, district leaders should consider the following key questions:

[Does each student have positive relationships with staff and other students?](#)³⁴

[Does each student who needs targeted social-emotional support receive it?](#)³⁵

[Does each student who needs targeted physical and mental health support receive it?](#)³⁶

School districts must prioritize school funding and invest in mental health resources for students of color. Furthermore, [research](#) has shown that students who receive adequate mental health support not only have greater overall well-being but also have better educational outcomes.³⁷ Social, emotional, and academic development of young people are improved in school climates that provide mental health resources and are staffed with trained mental health professionals who can cater to the needs of a diverse student body. District leaders have the authority to ensure that mental health support services are rooted in a race-based lens that fosters inclusivity, access, and positive practices for students of color.

Endnotes

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