

POLICY BRIEF

Mental Health in Schools Act of 2015

Tierra Parsons
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Introduction

Every school has students who are struggling with mental health problems (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). According to researchers, one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health problem during their school years (NASP, n.d.). Early negative experiences in homes, schools, or digital spaces, such as exposure to violence, the mental illness of a parent or other caregiver, and bullying and poverty, increase the risk of mental illness of children and adolescents (WHO, n.d.). With 8 million mental health related deaths occurring worldwide annually and 1 and 10 young people having mental health challenges severe enough to impair their daily functioning, addressing mental health needs in school is critically important and schools have a proactive role to play in the psychological well-being of children (Walker, et al., 2016; ACMH, n.d.; Ranganathan, 2008). This policy brief provides an overview of the Mental Health in Schools Act of 2015, a discussion about current K-12 student mental health challenges and the influence of mental health stigma, as well as a synopsis of the benefits of including mental health supports and education in schools.

Schools are both ground zero for the effects of mental health problems in children and youth and critical players in providing services; yet, too many schools are faced with inadequate resources (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). According to the National Council for Behavioral Health (n.d.), The Mental Health Schools Act of 2015 serves as a solution to address the concern regarding inadequate school mental health resources. This is a policy that builds on a highly-effective program known as the Safe Schools/Healthy Students program, which

strengthens partnerships between local education and community programs including (but not limited to) local primary health, juvenile justice and child welfare entities, and provides funding to place on-site qualified mental health and substance use professionals in schools across the country to provide behavioral health services for students and their families at no charge (National Council of Behavioral Health, n.d.); to include comprehensive staff development for school and community personnel working in schools (Congress.gov, n.d.). The implementation of the tenants of this act is important because statistically, the biggest health issues of school children are related to mental health and historically, there has been a significant gap between many youth who are in need of treatment and those who actually receive mental health care (Puolakka, et al., 2014; Burns et al., 1995; Leaf et al., 1996, as cited in Masia-Warner 2006). If mental health problems are left unaddressed, the long-term consequences will contribute to a student's most intractable problems including unemployment, civil disengagement, incarceration, substance abuse, lost productivity and poor health (World Health Organization, 2003 as cited in Rossen & Cowan, 2014).

Current Mental Health Challenges in K-12 Schools

K-12 students around the world are currently experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression and trauma than previous generations, making the need for school mental health resources more urgent than ever (Nelson, 2020). Since the emergence of COVID-19, youth are faced with additional challenges that impact their mental well-being to include but are not limited to remote learning and social limitations. According to Quirk (2020), youth are wired to rely on peer

relationships to a greater extent than adults. With boredom of remote learning, anxiety about an uncertain future, and the disappearance of summer jobs and internships, it is no surprise that young people are reporting major mental health strains (Quirk, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (n.d.) found that anxiety disorders were the most commonly reported mental disorders, followed by oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). According to researchers, schools most frequently suspend those students with the greatest academic, economic and emotional needs (Bruns et al., 2004). Children who are suspended from school are more likely to develop a range of mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety as well behavioral disturbances, according to a study published in the Journal of Psychological Medicine (Pedersen, 2018). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged many schools and providers to reimagine school operations and service provision with respect to the unique presenting problems that students experience. It is important to understand that the approach to rethinking mental health in schools is not so much a matter of adhering to the recommendations of national policies or waiting to implement what is prescribed from the top nor is it only about dealing with specific problems as they occur; but more so about taking a holistic and sustainable approach that anchors itself in providing more worthwhile and meaningful schooling experiences to all children (Ranganathan, 2008, p. 21) that are student-focused and situation-specific and contextually-considered.



Stigma

There is growing evidence that barriers to seeking help and achieving recovery for mental health problems include the stigma around mental illness and that stigmatizing attitudes start young (Mellor, 2014). Since children spend more awake hours in school than they do at home (Schuh, 2017), schools serve as one of the biggest opportunities for students to receive the social-emotional support that they need. The opportunity to receive this type of support is especially significant for students of color that are impacted by the mental health stigma, whose families have fewer resources and who would otherwise be less likely to receive mental health services outside of the school setting due to socio-economic barriers and limited resources. According to Kapil (2019), many young people of color who are facing mental health or substance use challenges don't seek therapy because of the stigma and shame associated with mental illness in their communities, in addition to the very limited access to the help they are in need. Schools can help reduce the stigma associated with mental health through the services, training, education and resources offered in the educational setting, in addition to the relationship with the school mental

health professional by normalizing help-seeking behaviors. Since nearly 60 million students will be learning from home for the foreseeable future due to COVID-19, making access to mental health services more challenging (Cruz & Mustgraves, n.d.), it is going to be important for schools to maximize their resources and collaborative efforts on the quest to reduce the stigma while meeting the mental health needs of students.

Benefits of Mental Health Services and Supports in Schools

For many young people, school is the primary provider of mental health resources (Quirk, 2020). Whether employed by the school system or affiliated with local mental health providers, school-based mental health clinicians have the potential to implement a range of preventive and targeted interventions to promote mental health among all students, as well as intervene with those students at risk of or experiencing problems (Flaherty and Weist, 1999 as cited in Bruns et al., 2004). Research demonstrates that students who receive social-emotional and mental health support achieve better academically (NASP, n.d.). According to Youth.gov (n.d.), “studies have also

shown the value of developing comprehensive school mental health programs in helping students have access to experiences that build social skills, leadership, self-awareness, and caring connections to adults in their school and community. Schools that also choose to collaborate with community partners have found that they can enhance the academic success of individual students. These partnerships have found to significantly improve schoolwide truancy and discipline rates, increase the rates of high school graduation, and help create a positive school environment in which a student can learn and be successful in school and in the community”. With the support of school mental health services, resources and programs, children and youth from all backgrounds will be better able to learn, thrive and function in their educational environment. Additionally, teachers, families and other professional supports will gain a greater level of understanding, awareness, competence and confidence as they seek to address and meet students' overall mental health and well-being needs.



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