

2021 Children's Mental Health Legislative Priorities

April 2021



Provide Students with Supportive School Environments

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect families across Texas, children are showing increasing signs of distress, anxiety, grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide. These emotional reactions not only impact children's health and well-being but their education, too. That's why it's so important that our schools be prepared to address emotional, mental, and behavioral barriers to learning that were created or worsened by the pandemic.

BUDGET RECOMMENDATION: Increase access to funding, training, and technical assistance to assist school districts in providing emotional, mental, and behavioral services and learning supports to students affected by the pandemic. Support the **Texas Education Agency School Safety Allotment budget rider adopted by the House Appropriations Committee** to focus funds over the next biennium on supporting research-based prevention practices related to mental and behavioral health that improve school safety.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **SB 406 by Sen. Menendez/HB 4249 by Rep. Talarico** to ensure school district leaders have an understanding of trauma's effects on student learning and their behavior and an awareness of district-wide strategies – including supporting the well-being of school staff – to help students bounce back from the pandemic and better focus on learning.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **SB 2063 by Sen. Menendez** to guide districts in addressing substance use among students in ways that keep all students safe and help those who need targeted support stay healthy and engaged in school.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 1194 by Rep. Wu** to require school districts to report on the use of force and disciplinary practices that expose students to trauma and are associated with negative school climates.



Help Students Develop Skills and Behaviors that Promote Success

Students with strong social-emotional skills are better able to cope with challenges, engage in their learning, and experience long-term social, professional, and academic benefits. Providing clear expectations for behavior, teaching skills needed to succeed in the school environment, and responding to problems with strategies to strengthen relationships and repair harm helps students stay connected with school rather than pushing students away when they are struggling.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 332 by Rep. Talarico** to allow school districts to use compensatory education funds to help students develop important skills like managing emotions, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and coping with challenges and stress in healthy ways.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 62 by Rep. Talarico** and **HB 1201 by Rep. Wu** to promote the use of preventative and restorative discipline practices that teach students skills needed to manage conflict and build relationships while keeping all students safe and connected within their school community.



Increase Children's Access to Mental Health Services and Support

When children are exposed to significant, prolonged, or multiple challenges, they can experience physiological changes in their brains and bodies that can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health. This means that children can continue to feel the negative effects of the pandemic even after the pandemic has ended.

BUDGET RECOMMENDATION: Support **Senate Rider 53** in the **Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board budget** to increase funding for the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium, including projects to increase children's access to mental health care in primary care and school settings.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 240 by Rep. Thompson/SB 51 by Sen. Zaffrini** to include a child-specific definition of mental illness in the Texas Insurance Code so that issues and treatments specific to children are properly addressed and require private health plans to provide coverage for treatment of serious emotional disorders among children.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 1114 by Rep. Thierry/SB 325 by Sen. West** to encourage school-based health clinics to include mental health services among the array of primary health care services they provide to students.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 1432 by Rep. Ramon** and **HB 4265 by Rep. Rose/SB 2104 by Sen. Zaffrini** to increase access to peer support services for youth and the families that care for them.



Create Suicide-Safer Schools and Communities

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support bills that would help protect students from suicide risk, including **HB 1144 by Rep. Ramos**, **HB 1014 by Rep. Bucy**, and **SB 980 by Sen. Powell**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **HB 4041 by Rep. Neave** to require residential child-care facilities and child-placing agencies serving children and youth in foster care to have evidence-based suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention policies in place.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Support **SB 2068 and SB 2070 by Sen. Menendez** and **HB 4074 and HCR 58 by Rep. Hunter** to improve the ongoing collection and use of suicide-related data to inform state and community efforts to prevent suicide risks and deaths.