

TEA Request for Safe and Healthy Students: Preventing and Addressing Student Mental Health Concerns in School

Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee Regarding Article III

Texans Care for Children applauds the Governor and legislative leaders for including student mental health among their priorities this legislative session. We support the Senate's efforts to expand adults' and children's access to psychiatric treatment in the community, but we also believe that state strategies to address student mental health must include providing support for schools. Schools are on the front-line of working with children and youth, many of whom have or are at risk for mental health concerns. Schools have a vested interest in addressing student mental health, which is strongly interconnected to learning and behavior. School practices can prevent students from developing mental health concerns. They can also trigger or exacerbate mental health problems that put students' education, health, and safety at risk.

We urge the Senate Finance Committee to add TEA's Safe and Healthy Schools Exceptional Item to SB 1 and provide additional funding beyond the \$54.5 million requested by TEA.

Recommendations

- 1. Fund the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) Exceptional Item Request 1: *Safe and Healthy Schools*.**
Out of the \$54.5 million request, TEA proposes using \$37 million to build capacity within TEA, education service centers, and school districts to address student mental health and positive school climate, primarily through grants in FY 2020. The only funding requested for FY 2021 is to support six FTEs and TEA's work related to student mental health and positive school culture. Schools in Texas need a reliable place for ongoing guidance and assistance in identifying and implementing programs and strategies to meet their local needs, especially those in rural and smaller districts which may have the resources available in larger or more urban districts.

2. Provide additional funds beyond TEA's request in order to continue grants to help districts address student mental health and positive school climate beyond FY 2020. The agency is providing the Legislature with a good starting place to begin its discussions on how the state will provide ongoing support to schools to address student mental health and safety. The committee must decide if the funding levels proposed by TEA - *for essentially just one fiscal year* - is adequate to meet the needs of school districts across the state in becoming better equipped to not only address students struggling with social, emotional, and mental health during the school day, but also to prevent students from developing concerns or behaviors that known to put their education, health, and safety at risk.

Many students in Texas are not “head-ready” to engage in their learning. Student mental health, learning, and behavior are highly interconnected. Investments in school finance or academic interventions will only go so far to improve student educational outcomes if student mental health is not also addressed in the school setting. Stress, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, risky behaviors, and trauma/chronic adversity are all examples of non-academic barriers that get in the way of student learning. A scan of indicators suggest that many students in Texas experience risk factors - *both inside and outside of school* - that can get in their way of their ability to learn:

- **BULLYING:** In 2017, 19 percent of high school students in Texas reported being bullied at school in the past year. Surveys of parents of all school-age children report similar rates of bullying.
- **HOMELESSNESS:** There are more than 100,000 students known to be homeless in Texas in any given school year.¹
- **ABUSE OR NEGLECT:** More than 29,000 school-age children were confirmed by CPS as being victims of abuse/neglect in 2018.
- **SUBSTANCE MISUSE:** In 2017, 12 percent – one out of eight – high school students in Texas reported recent binge drinking. One in seven high school students (15 percent) reported having used prescription pain medication inappropriately.
- **HOPELESSNESS:** In 2017, 34 percent of Texas high school students – one out of three - reported having felt so sad or hopeless for weeks at time during the past year, causing them stop doing some of their regular activities.
- **ATTEMPTED SUICIDE:** In 2017, 12 percent of Texas high school students – one out of eight – attempted suicide in the last year.

¹ Texas Legislative Budget Board. (2016) Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools.
http://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/Publications/Issue_Briefs/3088_Homeless_Students.pdf

Students who have experienced multiple traumas or chronic adverse conditions are most at risk for problems that threaten their education and health. In most cases, it's not the type of trauma a student experiences that puts their health, safety, and education at risk but the number of traumas and the length of exposures to adversity that predict how well a student will respond to the challenges they face in school and life. A 2016 survey on child health suggests that in a typical elementary school classroom in Texas, there are likely five students who have been exposed to two or more adverse experiences and are likely to have learning and behavior challenges stemming from the physiological effects of chronic stress.²

Students in Texas Having Multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences, Increasing the Risk to Learning and Behavior³	
Among Elementary School Age Children (6-11 years old)	22 percent
Among Middle and High School Age Children (12-17 years old)	35 percent

Risks don't determine outcomes. Many students thrive in spite of the adversity in their lives, protected by internal and external characteristics that “buffer” them from risk. The likelihood that these “risk factors” will disrupt a child’s education and healthy development depend on how many risk factors they face, how severe they are, and how many “protective factors” are in place to build students resilience and ability to cope. Research in public health and education have identified strategies to increase protective factors and reduce or mitigate the effect of risk factors among children and youth. Schools are uniquely positioned to provide students with some of these protective factors that help neutralize risk factors. Unfortunately, schools with inadequate training and resources for staff can also inadvertently contribute to risk factors by implementing counterproductive student discipline policies, allowing bullying to fester, or through other means.

Some of the protective factors schools can provide students include:

- Building students skills related to managing their emotions and behavior, coping with stress and anxiety, and forming and maintaining positive relationships.
- Fostering supportive relationships with trusted adults, such as teachers or coaches.
- Providing students with school-based services and supports that help them address social, emotional, and behavior concerns, and helping their families connect to community-based mental health services when its needed.

² Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health. 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) data query. Retrieved from www.childhealthdata.org.

³ Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health. 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) data query. Retrieved from www.childhealthdata.org.

TEA's *Safe and Healthy Students* request sets forth a framework the state can use to get tools and resources into the hands of educators - the people who interact with students on a regular basis - to enable them preventing mental health concerns from developing or worsening, and supporting the treatment and recovery of students with serious concerns while they are in school. It would help schools to identify and use research-based strategies to:

- Improve the educational outcomes of all students by fostering safe and supportive learning environments that are conducive to learning and prevent the occurrence of school-based adversities;
- Address small mental health and behavior concerns among students before they can grow into big problems that jeopardize students' education, health, and safety; and
- Provide students with mental disorders with school-based services so they can be successful in both school and in their recovery.

For additional information on the issues discussed in this testimony, please contact Josette Saxton at jsaxton@txchildren.org or the Texans Care for Children office at 512-473-2274 or through our website, www.txchildren.org.