

Student Mental Health in the Texas Education Agency FY 2024-2025 State Budget

Testimony to the Legislative Budget Board and Office of the Governor on the Texas Education Agency's 2024-25 Legislative Appropriations Request

We are greatly disappointed in the absence of an exceptional item in the Texas Education Agency (TEA) budget to address the growing mental health crisis among students. In the Summary of Behavioral Health Funding, the TEA reports it received \$0 appropriations for behavioral health for the 2022-23 biennium and makes no request for behavioral health funding for the 2024-2025 biennium.¹ The TEA budget for the next two years – and the additional revenue that state leaders will have available in the upcoming legislative session – provide an opportunity for budget writers to assist school districts in implementing school mental health strategies outlined in legislation enacted in 2019 (HB 18 and SB 11) that provide a framework for a seamless continuum of classroom and campus supports to students with and without mental health challenges.

Schools are not responsible for treating mental health disorders – nor should they be. However, schools play a role in helping students recover from the widespread challenges children have experienced in recent years. Failure to do so will put the educational success and mental health of many students at risk. Most students will largely recover from the hardships they have faced as stability and routine are restored in their lives after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, decades of brain science tell us the damaging effects of trauma will continue to influence some children's thoughts, behaviors, learning, and development in the months and years ahead, even into adulthood.²

The need for districts to support the mental health of their students is not new, but it has become more critical. Prior to the pandemic, in a school classroom of 25 students, five were estimated to be struggling with issues of depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use disorders, or more.³ The pandemic added an unprecedented disruption, which takes a toll on a child's mental well-being. In recent years, students in Texas have experienced disruption in their education, social isolation, family stress and economic instability, uncertainty about the future, loss of loved ones, and violence in their homes, schools, and communities. About 14,000 children lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19 in the first 15 months of the pandemic alone.⁴ The tragic violence at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde in May 2022

was the latest mass trauma event to devastate an entire community and cause fear and anxiety among students, families, and educators across the state.

Comprehensive School Mental Health Strategies Promote Student Learning and Wellbeing

The comprehensive school mental health strategies as outlined in HB 18 and SB 11 enacted in 2019 provide a framework for districts to provide a continuum of classroom and campus supports to students with and without mental health challenges. Comprehensive school mental health is a multi-level, tiered approach that uses prevention and intervention practices to promote a positive school climate for all students and staff, provide targeted support to students showing early struggles or who are at risk of mental health concerns, and connects the families of students with identified mental health needs to treatment when needed.

- **Services provided by TCHATT are an example of intensive school mental health services, the highest tier of service intended for students who have a diagnosable mental disorder and a need for specialized mental health treatment.**
- **Most students receiving TCHATT services will also require “lower tier” and less intensive classroom- and campus-based interventions and supports to help them succeed in school.** Examples of lower-tiered services include regular check-ins with a school counselor, having a safe space to go to when they are feeling overwhelmed, and targeted skill-building opportunities to help them develop healthy coping strategies.
- **Most students experiencing mental distress do not require the level of services that TCHATT provides and will show improvement following lower-level school-based interventions.** All students benefit from schoolwide practices that contribute to students feeling a sense of belonging, safety, and shared responsibility in their school community. The lowest tiered interventions support the mental wellness and development of all students. They include things like schoolwide positive behavior approaches, restorative discipline practices, and helping students develop skills to regulate their emotions and behavior.

Funding is Needed for Comprehensive School Mental Health Strategies

In its LAR, TEA reports it received \$0 appropriations for behavioral health for the 2022-23 biennium and makes no request for behavioral health funding for the 2024-2025 biennium.⁵ Districts are authorized to use the School Safety Allotment (SAA) on mental health-related strategies that are part of

their school safety efforts, however, few of them report doing so. Twelve percent of Texas school districts used any portion of their SSA funds for mental health personnel and support; 8 percent of districts spent some funds on "behavioral health services" and 13 percent used a portion of their SSA funding on "suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention."⁶ The percentages indicate whether districts used any portion of their SSA funding on those particular activities. The percentages do not address the amount spent on each activity.

School districts and TEA have relied on temporary federal funding to address student mental health.

Federal grants will go away, but the need to address the trauma, grief, anxiety and despair students in Texas experience will continue. The federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and other federal discretionary grants – such as Project AWARE grants from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – have provided vital funding for school districts and TEA efforts to support the implementation of school-based practices outlined in both HB 18 and the safe and supportive school program outlined in SB 11. However, federal funds will lapse, but students will continue to struggle. In particular, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds will lapse in 2023, and Project AWARE funding is expected to end in 2026. Without support from the Texas Legislature, many of the mental health support staff, teacher support, skill-building programming, and services students, teachers, and families currently have access to are at risk of going away, too.

Recommendations:

- 1. The Texas Legislature should appropriate \$500 million for the biennium to create a Mental Health Allotment to help school districts directly support the mental wellness of all students.** Each district should receive a minimum of \$100,000 with enhancements for rural and underserved districts. Districts should have the flexibility to use the funds to develop or enhance comprehensive school mental health strategies that meet the specific needs of their students and school community, using strategies that align with best practice school mental health guidance issued by TEA and HHSC. Examples of strategies districts could use the allotment for include:
 - Supporting the salaries of school personnel responsible for planning, coordinating, delivering, or monitoring comprehensive school mental health supports and services
 - Training school personnel on effective practices and district and campus procedures
 - Contracting with community organizations to deliver prevention and intervention services; and
 - Supporting staff wellness.
- 2. The Texas Legislature should appropriate \$11 million for the biennium to provide districts with access to training, technical assistance, and guidance to support the effective implementation of comprehensive school mental health practices.** State funding for training and technical assistance would allow replication of support that is currently provided to school districts and

education service centers participating in the federally funded Project AWARE grant through the TEA. The main objectives of Project AWARE are to increase awareness of mental health issues among school-aged youth; provide training for school personnel and other adults who interact with school-aged youth to detect and respond to mental health issues; and connect school-aged youth, who may have behavioral health issues (including serious emotional disturbance or serious mental illness), and their families to needed services. The Legislature should explore funding a statewide technical assistance center to provide training and technical assistance to schools on using evidence-based comprehensive school mental health practices, just as the Legislature funds the Texas School Safety Center to assist schools in implementing physical security practices. The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration funds the Texas Institute of Mental Health (TIEMH) at the University of Texas Austin's Steve Hicks School of Social Work to provide training and technical assistance in support of the use of evidence-based practices, including in schools, to promote mental health, intervene early, prevent suicide and serious mental illness across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Region 6 (which includes Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas). Funding from the state would allow TIEMH or a similar entity to provide more targeted and dedicated training and technical assistance to schools in Texas.

Endnotes

1. Texas Education Agency. Legislative Appropriations Request 2024-2025. 6.J. Summary of Behavioral Health Funding
2. Howard J. Osofsky, MD, PhD, Joy D. Osofsky, PhD, Mindy Kronenberg, PhD, Adrienne Brennan, PhD, and Tonya Cross Hansel, PhD (2009). "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Children After Hurricane Katrina: Predicting the Need for Mental Health Services." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Vol. 79, No. 2, 212–220.
3. Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. 2019-2020 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) data query. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB).
4. Hillis SD, Blenkinsop A, Villaveces A, et al. COVID-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States. *Pediatrics*. 2021;148(6):e2021053760
5. Texas Education Agency. Legislative Appropriations Request 2024-2025. 6.J. Summary of Behavioral Health Funding
6. Texas School Safety Center. (2022) *2017-2020 District Audit Report: Findings on Safety and Security in Texas School Districts* <https://locker.txssc.txstate.edu/cfa9cdc12a7a1a2d662f68d1c91b1a21/2017-2020-DAR-Report.pdf>