

**Testimony of the Education Law Center
Pennsylvania House Education and Human Services Committees
Mental Health Supports for Secondary School Students**

May 24, 2021

On behalf of the Education Law Center (ELC), thank you for inviting us to share testimony on the need for mental health supports for high school students. ELC is a statewide non-profit legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Each year, we provide legal consultation and representation to hundreds of students, families, and community partners across the state. As community lawyers, we work collaboratively with students, parents, and community partners to ensure that students who live and learn at the intersection of multiple identities have the affirming supports and structures necessary to thrive in school.

Prioritizing the social and emotional well-being of students creates safe and inclusive school environments. While the need for increased school-based mental health supports for students has been a pressing need for many years, the pandemic and remote learning have emphasized the important role schools play in the social and emotional well-being of students. The pandemic also intensified the inequities that Black and Brown students, low-income students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and immigrant and refugee students were already facing, further exacerbating the stress and anxiety already experienced by many students.

By focusing on the social and emotional well-being of students, schools can use mental health supports as positive tools to address multiple issues, including discipline and lack of attendance instead of resorting to punitive measures which fail to address the underlying causes of student behavior and choices. As we transition to post-pandemic learning and beyond, ELC offers the following recommendations to ensure that school-based mental health supports are equitable and welcoming for all students:

Ensure that mental health resources are culturally competent. Mental health resources are most effective when they are culturally competent, which means they are attuned and respectful to the beliefs, language, and behaviors of the individual receiving services. Integrating cultural competency results in greater trust between school personnel and students, encourages more student participation and engagement, and improves educational outcomes. Since cultural competency must be developed and learned, schools should invest in and require cultural competency training for its mental health providers. Schools can also foster student engagement by creating partnerships with community organizations which understand the diverse needs and cultures of the community. To further ensure equitable access to mental health services, schools should provide interpreters to enable English Learners to work with school-based mental health providers.

Provide trauma-informed care. Schools should implement best practices of trauma-informed care to support students who are experiencing the effects of trauma and to create a welcoming school climate. During the pandemic, many students faced new or compounded trauma as their families faced health issues, financial concerns, and housing insecurity. The effects of isolation from peers, school activities, and social supports were profound. Schools should continue to provide all adults in the school setting with training on trauma-informed approaches to promote a positive and safe school environment.

Prioritize support and care for Black girls. Black girls' need for mental health supports is often misinterpreted and met with over-disciplining, pushing them out of school and into the child welfare and juvenile legal systems. Schools should prioritize the use of culturally competent mental health resources and implement restorative justice practices instead of punitive measures to foster a welcoming and safe climate for Black girls to thrive. To support the social and emotional well-being of Black girls, schools should engage with and learn from community-based organizations that understand their unique needs.

Hire and train more mental health professionals. Schools require more counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other qualified mental health professionals with manageable caseloads who can serve the needs of diverse student populations. Currently, the ratio of mental health providers to students is severely lacking, resulting in overburdening of providers and inadequate attention to students. Dedicating and reallocating resources to mental health supports and the continued training of school-based providers promotes a positive and supportive school climate and is more effective than responding to behaviors with punitive measures.

Integrate social and emotional learning into curricula. Social and emotional learning (SEL) that is both developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive would promote positive in-school relationships and normalize conversations around mental wellness. SEL encourages students to identify and manage emotions, establish healthy relationships, and show empathy. Importantly, SEL empowers students to make responsible decisions which lead to safe and inclusive school communities.

All of these recommendations require a sustained increase in fair and equitable funding to ensure that all students in Pennsylvania have public schools with the funds necessary to support their social and emotional well-being and to create a welcoming school climate. **We urge the legislature to allocate adequate basic education funding and special education funding so that districts can appropriately provide mental health supports and services to students.**

Thank you for highlighting the importance of social and emotional well-being and mental health supports for high school students. We would welcome the opportunity to continue this conversation with Members of the Education and Human Services Committees.

Respectfully submitted,

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