



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

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Testimony Submission, Joint Education and Human Services Committees

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On behalf of our more than 13,000 members, I thank Committee Chairs Sonney, Longiotti, Farry, and Cruz, and all members present for this necessary hearing to discuss the mental health initiatives in our schools across Pennsylvania.

As educators, we must understand and help mitigate any mental health challenges that students may be facing. As we continue to navigate this unprecedented pandemic and look towards a full reopening of school buildings in the fall, it will be more important than ever that we ensure that our schools offer robust resources to meet the social emotional health needs of our young people.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, in partnership with the Fund Our Facilities Coalition, issued a community survey to help shape our collective response to allocating the American Rescue Plan funding. Over 4,600 respondents completed the survey, with a vast majority of the respondents being PFT members. Their insight and the insight of parents, students, and community members are invaluable. Respondents answered questions about their top priorities and were also given a chance to share open feedback. **The second most important priority for the members was mental health support, with nearly 65% including it as a critical priority and 47% including it in their top three priorities.**

There is no one size fits all solution to addressing mental health, but we know that resources must be developed in partnership with educators and advocates. Budgets need to include more support staff like counselors, nurses, school psychologists, and school counselors. These resources cost money, but they are necessary to have somewhere to turn when there is a school crisis. Our budget must reflect this priority not just this year, but every year going forward.

All Philadelphia students will benefit from social, emotional learning, and trauma-informed care. Our students come to school with a host of experiences that inform them, and it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we are effectively meeting their needs. In Philadelphia, we were pleased to be part of the group of stakeholders contributing to Councilmember Katherine Gilmore Richardson's [excellent report on Conflict Resolution Training](#). This type of program, which emphasizes real, practical solutions that encompass the input of practitioners will be key moving forward.

These strategies, we know, are just part of a larger framework for addressing mental health in our schools. According to the authors of a recent study published in [JAMA Pediatrics](#), even before COVID-19, "Schools are "the de facto mental health system for many children and adolescents, providing mental health services to 57 percent of adolescents who need care." We need ongoing investments to sustain essential mental health services so that students can learn and thrive when they feel safe and healthy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for this important hearing.