

House Education Committee Public Hearing on Mental Health in Schools

Wednesday, January 17, 2024 at 10 AM

Written testimony of Michael Pennington, Executive Director Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)

Good morning, Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Michael Pennington, and I serve as Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, also known as PCCD. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to be here today to highlight the critical work being done by PCCD to help address the growing mental and behavioral health needs of Pennsylvania's youth.

As you may know, PCCD serves as Pennsylvania's justice planning and policymaking agency. We administer a wide range – and growing number – of programs, funding streams, and initiatives aligned with the agency's mission, which is to enhance the quality, coordination, and planning within the criminal and juvenile justice systems, to facilitate the delivery of services to victims of crime, and to increase the safety of our communities.

PCCD has supported efforts to make communities safer for all Pennsylvanians for 45 years and ensuring that youth feel safe and supported in school is among our top priorities. Today, I am going to speak specifically to the impacts of the School Mental Health & Safety and Security grant program and the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), both of which are administered by PCCD.

School Safety and Security Grants Program

The School Safety and Security Grants Program was originally established in 2018 to provide funding for school entities of the Commonwealth to support the safety of students, staff and visitors. This grant program is administered by PCCD's School Safety and Security Committee (SSSC), and expanded with the passage of Act 55 of 2022 and, most recently, Act 33 of 2023, to provide funding for mental health personnel and services, resources, training, and supports for schools.

Since 2018, PCCD has administered more than half a billion dollars in state and federal funds through the School Safety and Security Grant Program to eligible school entities throughout the Commonwealth to support a wide array of school safety needs.¹ This includes \$180 million appropriated to PCCD since FY22-23 through the non-competitive School Mental Health Grants Program, which provided at least \$100,000 in funds to all school districts and at least \$70,000 for charter schools (brick-and-mortar, cyber, regional), area career and technical schools (CTCs), and Intermediate Units (IUs). PCCD recently opened the latest round of FY23-24 School Mental Health Grants for eligible school entities on January 10, 2024, made possible through the enactment of this year's budget and enabling School Code legislation (Act 33).

School Safety and Security Grant Program Eligible Project Activities – Full Listing

Section 1315.1-B of the PA Public School Code provides for school mental health grants for the 2023-24 school year and outlines a wide array of eligible programs and activities² designed to address student behavioral health needs. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Costs associated with training and compensation of certified school counselors, licensed professional counselors, licensed social workers, licensed clinical social workers and school psychologists, as well as mental health staff and expanding contracts with mental health providers.
- Coordinating and integrating local mental health services for students and school employees, expanding telemedicine delivery of school-based mental health services and providing online programs, educational materials, and applications to offer supplemental mental health services to students (e.g., peer support, etc.).
- Staff training programs in the use of positive behavior supports, de-escalation techniques, crisis response, trauma-informed approaches, identifying the signs and signals of mental health concerns, and best practices for seeking appropriate mental health assistance.
- Development and implementation of violence prevention programs and curricula, including mental health early intervention, self-care, bullying, and suicide awareness and prevention.
- Administration of evidence-based screenings for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and provision of trauma-informed counseling services to students.
- Trauma-informed approaches to education to increase student and school employee access to quality trauma support services and behavioral health case and other programs/initiatives.
- School-based threat assessment and management.

As with FY22-23 funding, by statute, school entities must use FY23-24 School Mental Health Grants to address any gaps they have related to the Committee's established Behavioral Health Baseline Criteria Standards, which are designed to help guide school entities' decisions about behavioral health needs. School entities must demonstrate they have met the most basic, foundational 'Level 1' elements (or plan to use grant funding to meet gaps) before they can use grant funds to support activities associated with more advanced criteria at Levels 2 and 3. PCCD has developed enhanced guidance providing examples of how school entities can use grant funding to address gaps at each level, as well as an interactive Self-Assessment Checklist Tool allowing school entities to compare the baseline criteria standards with their own unique policies, practices, and procedures. These resources are available to view and download on PCCD's website.

We thank the General Assembly and Governor Shapiro for continuing to make critical investments into this valuable program. We know that these investments will need to be sustained in order to fully address the immediate and long-term needs of our kids, schools, and communities. That was a message that came through loud and clear from a survey of school mental health initiatives that found that the number one and number two needs of schools,

² Per 24 P.S. §13-1315.1-B, funds can be used to support the following items or activities included in 24 P.S. §13-1306-B(j)(6, 10, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30).

respectively, was more funding for additional staff/contracted professionals as well as for expanding mental health programs and services.

Act 55 of 2022 added Section 1305.1 B to the PA Public School Code, requiring PCCD's School Safety and Security Committee to develop and distribute a new survey instrument to measure mental health services in school entities. This five-question survey was added as part of the School Mental Health & Safety and Security Grant application and participants included school districts, charter schools, career and technical centers, and intermediate units.

Some key take-aways from this survey³ include:

- Nearly all (91%) of school entities report offering mental health education programming of some sort in the classroom.
- Over 80% have adopted mental or behavioral health curriculum to shape instruction or programming.
- Nearly all school entities (91%) report offering training or professional development to assist in recognizing/assisting students with MH needs.
- Vast majority of school entities cited funding to hire/contract staff as the number one priority issue to improve mental health education programming and curricula.

This survey, in addition to the Pennsylvania Youth Survey, has assisted us in collecting valuable data which we analyze and use to highlight needs and fill gaps in funding across Pennsylvania communities.

Pennsylvania Youth Survey

Since 1989, the Commonwealth has conducted a survey of school students in the 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grades to learn about their behavior, attitudes and knowledge concerning alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence. PAYS is sponsored and conducted every two years by PCCD in partnership with the Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Drug and Alcohol Programs.

The data gathered in PAYS serve two primary needs. First, the results provide school administrators, state agency directors, legislators and others with critical information concerning the changes in patterns of the use and abuse of these harmful substances and other concerning behaviors. Second, the survey assesses risk factors that are related to these behaviors and the protective factors that help guard against them. This information allows community leaders, including school administrators, to direct prevention resources to areas where they are likely to have the greatest impact.

In 2023, 392 out of the 500 Pennsylvania school districts participated in PAYS, as well as 62 other school entities including charter, private, career and technical training schools and one Intermediate Unit.

While we do not yet have data from the 2023 PAYS administration, data from the most recent administration of the PAYS in 2021 shows more than four in 10 students statewide



reported feeling sad or depressed most days. Rates of self-harm, including suicidal ideation and attempted suicide, have also increased to alarming levels. At every grade level, the percentage of students reporting they had seriously considered, planned, and/or attempted suicide increased, with increases particularly pronounced among students in younger grades (e.g., 6th and 8th grades). In 2021, nearly one in five students said they seriously considered suicide, and 10.9% had attempted suicide at least once in the past year.

Those troubling statistics have been a call to action for state and local leaders alike and PAYS serves as a mechanism for ensuring the programs, services, and interventions put in place are making a difference for young people. PAYS is the voice of our students, the only statewide data that comes directly from them, and it serves as an invaluable resource that can help guide our priorities and policies to meet their needs and to help build their resiliency.

Keeping Pennsylvania youth safe and healthy is a top priority of the Shapiro-Davis Administration. This is exemplified by the Governor's Behavioral Health Council, on which I have the honor to serve and represent PCCD.

Our kids can't learn if they don't feel safe within the walls of their school. As a long-time supporter of evidence-based prevention initiatives, we also know that investments in our youth pay dividends for making Pennsylvania a safer, better place for all.

We look forward to continuing this critical work in partnership with our colleagues in the room here today and across the Commonwealth.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony.