



The mission of the **PA Principals Association** is to ensure a quality education for every child by comprehensively supporting the educational leaders of our schools.

Good morning Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dr. Harrison Bailey, III. I serve as Principal of Liberty High School, a large, urban high-need school in the Bethlehem Area School District. I am also a member of the Pennsylvania Principals Association. In 2021, I was named Principal of the Year for the state of Pennsylvania, in affiliation with the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The PA Principals Association represents nearly 3,000 elementary and secondary school principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders who serve in public and private schools throughout the Commonwealth. On behalf of our members, staff, and students across the Commonwealth, I thank the committee for providing me with this opportunity. I would like to share my thoughts and experiences working to meet the overwhelming mental health needs of the students I have been called to serve.

Medical research informs us that trauma & toxic stress frequently have both an emotional and physiological impact on our brains and bodies. There are direct correlations between untreated exposure to toxic stress and long-term disease, ie. the big four killers (cancer, heart disease, stroke, & diabetes). Our children are unquestionably more susceptible to the negative impacts of this condition. As Maslow's Hierarchy tells us, failure to provide for the emotional safety of children results in an unstable youth with physiological barriers to learning and lifelong success.

In 2022, the National Association of Secondary School Principals published their *Survey of America's School Leaders and High School Students*. Developed and administered by an independent research firm, this online survey polled a nationally representative sample of 1,000 principals and assistant/vice principals in middle and high school and 1,000 8–12th-grade students enrolled in school for the 2021–22 school year. The findings revealed

that 74% of students needed help with their mental or emotional health. Of those who reported needing help, only 46% sought assistance and only 53% did, indeed, receive help. Of the students surveyed, 64% indicated mental health and self-care are valued at their school. When school leaders and students were asked what areas they felt were critically in need of funding, both groups ranked the addition of School Health Staff and the Reduction of Violence as their top areas of need.

The mental health crisis our schools are facing has reached epidemic levels. Although the pandemic certainly accelerated the negative impact on our youth, it truly just uncovered the already destitute conditions of mental health deserts that previously existed across our state. Our schools have become the hubs for community services and we are currently far from able to meet the needs of our students, especially those related to mental health. Over my 28 years in education, I have never heard such a consistent plea for assistance across educational leaders. Our kids are hurting and we need to help them.

Fortunately, after considerable collaboration and focused resources, Liberty High School has found a process that is putting a dent in this crisis. Through five critical steps, we have moved toward being a School of Wellness. First, every 9th-grade student receives mindfulness training to help them cope with the stressors of life and focus mentally. In addition, we begin each period of the day with an announced two-minute pause. This is done to allow our students time to refocus from the prior class and apply their mindfulness techniques. Second, we have developed a tiered assessment and service assignment process. This increases our ability to place students in the appropriate level of service while decreasing the frequency of overloading providers. Third, we purposefully infuse mental health curriculum into our Health classes to promote an understanding of social and emotional challenges. Fourth, we have provided considerable professional development to our entire staff on understanding trauma, toxic stress, and social-emotional learning. Finally and most importantly, our school has developed one of the Commonwealth's few school-based multi-tiered wellness centers for students. This

program marries a highly effective referral process with an array of impactful school-based services. These services include: a well-designed physical space, four individual and sixteen group counseling options, a peace room, occupational therapy, psychiatric care, social work-related supports, and a dedicated person to oversee the center. This was established through a multitude of partnerships with local universities, community organizations, school district investment, and numerous government grants. Over the prior two school years, we were able to provide mental health services for approximately 440 of the 730 students referred. When these students were surveyed about the services they received, 88 percent stated they made a difference in their lives, 95 percent felt the person they met with cared about them, and 82 percent said they were more hopeful about their future.

A recent example of a student who benefitted from the services we provided was Maria. This student and her father met with me due to engaging in a fight. During the meeting, Maria revealed that she lost control and attacked another student out of anger. Fighting through tears, she described the traumatic impact of her mother suffering from mental illness and homelessness. Maria turned to me in the middle of the meeting and asked for help to deal with her anger. Our students realize their situations and are asking for support. Fortunately, this was early in the school year and our therapists had an available spot. She was in individual therapy within a week and her physical aggression has significantly improved.

Unfortunately, I have had to tell many of our “Marias” later in the year that we have exhausted our available services and they will need to get through this some other way. This is exactly where we are and have been for many years. For example, earlier this year we had a student in crisis exhibiting some acute self-harm behaviors. His mother took him to the emergency room and he was admitted for observation over a weekend. He was released and his mother came to us to connect him with therapeutic services. When his guidance counselor asked about connecting him to services at the hospital where he was treated, she was told it would be a six-month wait. Our schools

are the only “game in town” for most of our families and we don’t have the resources we need.

Due to the ending of the ESSER grants and our school no longer receiving ATSI funds, we were unable to fund two of our four therapists this school year. As a result, we are now operating without two therapists. This is causing a significant number of our students in need of individual counseling to be placed on a waiting list and into group therapy settings when appropriate. We know that when Wellness Centers like ours are effectively funded and staffed they make a significant contribution to improving the quality of mental health in both our schools and the overall community. This is the true key to keeping our schools and communities healthy and safe.

In addition to the need for funding, mental health service providers have become very scarce across our state. As a result, the few school districts with available funds are struggling to find qualified therapists to do this essential work. If we hope to establish the wellness center model across our great Commonwealth, we will need to find ways to bolster the professional ranks of mental health workers.

In conclusion, I want to thank the Committee for considering legislation that brings attention to the dire need for remedies to the mental health crisis our students face every day. HB1367, HB1519, HB1553, and HB1665 all address issues and recommend solutions that target this crisis. I would also plead with you to not stop there. There is no one solution to this crisis. I would encourage you to go even further by proposing increased funding for wellness centers and additional mental health workers in every school, the adoption of curricula and programs to address the specific needs of our students, and other efforts that provide both proactive and reactive measures to meet the needs of each student every day.

For a more in-depth look at the great things happening at Liberty High School, view the video at this link: <https://vimeo.com/900244840/529a27d910?share=copy>