

**House Education Committee Hearing
Student Mental Health Hearings**

**Testimony of Dr. Jayme Banks PsyD, MBA
School District of Philadelphia
January 16, 2024**

Majority Chair Schweyer and Minority Chair Topper and All the Members of the House Education Committee, my name is Dr. Jayme Banks and it is my honor to be here today to talk about trauma informed education.

As Deputy Chief of Prevention, Intervention, and Trauma it's my responsibility to continue to build resources, supports, and tools that are available to schools, staff and students to address student mental health and trauma needs in the School District of Philadelphia.

The increase in mental health needs is evident nationally, in our city and in Philadelphia. Like School District's across the country, we certainly know that our students and staff have suffered very real trauma during the pandemic and that has only continued post-pandemic and especially with the increase in gun violence experienced in Philadelphia.

According to a recent report developed in partnership with the District and the CDC, the percentage of students who reported that they felt sad or hopeless for long periods of time increased from 31.4% in 2017 to 44.6% in 2021, and the percentage of students who did not feel close to people at their school increased from 35.5% in 2019 to 46.9% in 2021.

Pennsylvania's Safe2Say hotline, which provides students a confidential call for help when they are at risk of bullying, self-harm, drug use, or committing suicide also saw *an increase in calls*.

Prior to March 2020, 17% of tips received by the hotline for the 2019-20 school year were deemed a "life safety matter," meaning a student's immediate physical well-being or safety is at risk.

During the remaining months of the 2019-20 school year, 37% of tips were life safety matters, demonstrating the mental strain the pandemic put on students.

This was especially true in Philadelphia. While statewide the hotline saw an 18% increase in tips relating to personal safety from school years 2018-19 to 2019-20, Philadelphia saw a 62% increase over the same period.

We know that trauma and mental health needs impact learning and behavior, that's why focusing on expanding mental health and wellness support in our schools is **critical**.

A student's mental health needs can be a barrier to their academic achievement and their ability to thrive beyond our schools.

Simply put, we cannot teach our students if we are not addressing their emotional and mental health needs.

Given this, we have continued to increase the number of mental health supports in schools over the past couple of years and have been working with great partners to meet the need.

In February of 2023, we kicked off a new partnership with Kooth, an online mental health and well-being platform designed to provide access to personalized, digital mental health and well-being resources. Since then, **3000** Philadelphia students have accessed the online counseling, used the peer-to-peer support features, shared the digital resources, and more.

In partnership with the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbilities (DBHIDS) and Community Behavioral Health (CBH), we have implemented Intensive Behavioral Health Services (IBHS), where there is a behavioral health provider assigned to every school in our district. The District and CBH continue to work together on this partnership with the goal that these mental health providers become more than a partner to each school and become an integral part of the fabric of the school community.

Over the past year, we have introduced Healing Centered Engagement, a non-clinical trauma-informed approach to supporting youth and families. We have trained over 150 of our staff and over the summer, we offered 75 students the opportunity to attend a week at Camp Akili, an experience that aims to address community trauma and build stronger schools and communities.

Beyond the partnerships, we are also increasing staffing, interventions, and training within our schools.

Every year, we continue to increase the number of school counselors in our district. We currently have 441 counselors, which is a significant increase to the 275 counselors that we had in 2020-2021. In addition to counselor support, we continue to add additional mental health programs. An example of this is the The Support Team For Educational Partnership – what we call STEP. This program started 5 years ago, it was in 21 schools and now it is in 53 schools. These teams consist of 2 Master-level clinicians, a case manager, and a family peer specialist.

We have held training sessions for counselors and STEP staff on working with students with anxiety and trauma. Also trained staff on evidenced-based small group interventions for Trauma, Anxiety, and Depression.

We also cannot discuss the mental health of the district community without mentioning the impact of gun violence in Philadelphia. We have lost student life and students have been injured due to this violence.

I oversee a team of hardworking staff called the Prevention & Intervention Liaisons that are responsible for supporting schools and leading the school response when these tragedies occur.

These programs are so important for our students.

One student told me in the camp that we held last summer that all he needs is to be in the presence of adults that will truly listen to him and have safe spaces (physically and mentally) where he can be a kid.

We must continue to increase access to caring adults, safe spaces, and strong programming for our youth. This can only be accomplished by consistent funding that we do not have to question if it will be renewed yearly.

Thank you.