



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**House Education Committee
Hearing on School-Based Mental Health
January 17, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and members of the House Education Committee.

My name is Dr. Dana Milakovic, and I am the mental wellness and trauma specialist at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). I have prior experience as a school psychologist and appreciate being invited to provide both perspectives in today's hearing and conversation.

Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Positive mental health, particularly in K-12 students, has significant impacts on a child's ability to reach developmental milestones, and to achieve future personal, academic, and career success. When a student experiences poor mental health, they are more likely to miss school, drop out, engage in risky behavior, and use illicit substances. However, school-age children spend nearly half of each year in school, which means schools are uniquely positioned to assist students by fostering supportive learning environments where students feel safe both physically and psychologically. This has always been important but has become even more crucial in the aftermath of the pandemic.

In December 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a report entitled "Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools: An Action Guide for School and District Leaders." which highlights how mental health issues are worsening among adolescents. In 2021, 42% of high school students reported feeling so sad or helpless for at least two weeks in the past year that they couldn't participate in regular activities, and 22% reported seriously considering suicide. Educational leaders and teachers report stress at a level approximately two times higher than the average among other career sectors.

It is our responsibility, as mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers, to do everything within our power to help every student. We know that a focus on creating positive learning spaces where staff, families, and students feel a sense of belonging is a key element to fostering safe environments. Research consistently demonstrates that chronic stress negatively affects brain development and changes the trajectory of learning and social development; however, it also shows that positive relationships with adults can mitigate those developmental changes and increase resiliency.

When schools prioritize supportive learning environments, students have fewer mental health needs, and can form stronger connections with adults who can help them and serve as referral points for external mental health support when they are struggling. It is with this focus that the



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Department has taken several critical actions to help schools support students experiencing mental health issues.

- PDE encourages schools to partner with local organizations to ensure that proper supports are in place to address mental health issues and provide resources to students and families. Schools may take the approach of partnering with outside agencies to provide individual outpatient therapy in school. Partnerships can also include social-emotional learning programming, group sessions based on building and student need, violence prevention programming, and substance use awareness.
- In partnership with intermediate units throughout Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), PDE offers the Accelerated Learning Through an Integrated System of Support resource bank, which offers strategies to help school leaders create positive, supportive school environments. This toolkit provides current research, models, and best practice resources for school leaders to access and develop comprehensive plans to address the social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students and staff.
- PDE offers two comprehensive mental health PA Inspired Leadership courses for continuing professional education credit and a series of trauma-informed modules available on the Standards Aligned System portal at no cost to educators.
- Beginning with school year 2022-23, all school employees must receive at least three hours of school safety training per year, with at least two hours in situational awareness, trauma-informed approaches, behavioral health awareness, suicide and bullying awareness, and substance use awareness.
- By July 2025, all educator preparation programs in Pennsylvania must include a three-credit course that includes trauma-informed approaches, suicide, bullying, and substance use awareness.
- All 29 intermediate units have Social Emotional Wellness leads, which PDE funds through a Statewide System of Support for schools statewide. Social and Emotional Wellness leads are trained on comprehensive mental health and assist schools with integrating mental health and trauma informed practices into their policies, procedures, and daily practices.
- PDE received \$5 million in the 2023-24 budget to support pathways to certification for school-based mental health professions. The budget also allocated \$5 million to the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) for the PA HELPS Grant Program to continue supporting school-based mental health professionals during their internships. This funding will eliminate barriers, provide additional support, and encourage individuals to enter the mental healthcare profession in school settings. The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency received \$100 million to distribute



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school mental health grants to school districts, Intermediate Units, charter schools, regional charter schools, career and technical schools, and cyber charter schools.

Research consistently shows that the development of a supportive learning environment, where student connections are at the core of social-emotional well-being, enhances resilience in youth and leads to better outcomes in their personal and academic lives. Establishing a positive school climate benefits all students and staff but has the greatest impact on students who need it the most, whether we are fully aware of their needs or not.

We look forward to continuing to work with the General Assembly, schools, and communities to ensure young people are supported in all aspects of their lives. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.