

Date: November 17, 2023

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Positive Mental and Behavioral Health Supports

Overview

There are many contributing factors that enable students to succeed in school. School can be a place to share space with peers, be a safe environment to learn, and can be a place where students receive support and encouragement. Many students, however, encounter personal circumstances beyond the classroom that can affect their mental and behavioral health, causing a significant disruption to their ability to succeed in school. The Covid-19 pandemic was also a contributing factor impacting student mental health and well-being.

Mental health is generally defined as a psychological state that enables unique perception, thinking, and problem-solving abilities, which are experienced differently from one person to another, whereas behavioral health is the physical action connecting behavior and psychological well-being. These terms are often used interchangeably; however, they are distinct, and improving one can often improve the other. Specifically in children, when both conditions are positively managed, student outcomes benefit.

There have been numerous studies on mental health and behavioral health and how these two concepts manifest in school settings and student outcomes. Researchers have found the most impressionable time for mental and behavioral health is childhood. With evidence supporting the importance of understanding and improving childhood occurrences for optimal brain development and positive early learning experiences, it is imperative to provide supportive systems for children to thrive, especially in schools where children spend much of their time. Having supportive and intervention-based services in schools helps students prosper and in some instances, heal, with research demonstrating long lasting impacts.

According to researchers, schools that adopt harsh discipline policies and zero-tolerance suspension and expulsion threaten the academic success of all students, including students who have never been suspended. Students become more at risk of social, structural, and academic difficulties, losing educational opportunities and dropping out. In the long term, students are at risk of the school-to-prison pipeline contributing to increased public expenses and lost economic self-sufficiency in life. Research has shown when children lack supportive environments and the inability to access high quality intervention, they are at risk of behaviors such as anti-socialism, aggression, or disruption. The U.S.

Key Takeaways

The United States has implemented a series of acts that studies and supports effective evidence-based treatment for children.

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A 2019 study found one in six children aged 6 to 17 will experience at least one mental health disorder, such as anxiety or depression, and only half will receive mental health treatment.

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New Mexico's child mental health treatment aligns with the national average. PED, DOH, and UNM are creating effective services to increase child treatment and intervention services.

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Potential programs that support mental and behavioral health intervention and prevention that are already practiced in New Mexico.

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Department of Education (DOE) found schools can improve safety and positive learning experiences by having a welcoming environment and providing fair, non-discriminatory, and effective responses to misbehaviors. For students with mental and behavioral health conditions to receive an equitable and beneficial education, it is important to consider how school-based support and intervention services are part of a healthy school environment that enables learning.

Across the Nation

National Response to Mental Health and Behavioral Health

National screening tools such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey have helped quantify the number of individuals who have negative childhood experiences. The U.S. has responded to the critical need to address mental health and behavioral health through implementation of acts that would improve mental health and behavioral health understanding and care. The following are a list of acts that contribute directly and indirectly to child mental and behavioral health.

- 1946: The National Mental Health Act
- 1949: National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) established
- 1955: Mental Health Study Act by NIMH
- 1973: Rehabilitation Act of 1973; Section 504
- 1975: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- 1980: Mental Health Systems Act
- 1990: Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; Title II
- 2000: The Children's Health Act of 2000
- 2010: Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

These acts help transform the understanding and treatment of mental health through research, innovative thinking, and increased scientific perspective. Due to the abundance of evidence produced through related research, many nonprofit organizations, coalitions, and other avenues of supportive and intervention services for mental and behavioral health have been able to provide advocacy, effective treatment services, and resources in alignment with these federal acts. Additionally, these acts are helping to spur further research and ongoing evaluation.

Student Mental Health and Behavioral Health in the United States

Research has consistently shown when mental health conditions are inadequately treated, or left untreated, conditions can worsen and can also be costly in the future. Untreated conditions among students have been correlated to high rates of disengagement among students, school dropout, unemployment, risky behaviors, and early death. A 2019 study found one in six children ages six to 17 years old will experience at least one mental health disorder, such as anxiety or depression, and only half will receive mental health treatment. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2021 that nearly all indicators of health and well-being for youth significantly worsened. It is also important to note the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10 to 34 is suicide. The Covid-19 pandemic was also a contributing factor to student mental and behavioral health due to the time spent out of school. Through support from Congress, state investments, and continued efforts by numerous organizations and agencies that serve young people, mental health and behavioral health services have increased and there is significant effort



to educate society on the risks and benefits of untreated and treated conditions and the effectiveness in treatment services and resources.

The DOE has also contributed to the amplification of the importance of mental and behavioral health by recognizing the impact mental health has on accessing learning, participation rates while in school, and with social, structural, and academic expectations in school. In response, the DOE has continued to support states in implementing mental and behavioral health efforts by prioritizing wellness for all students, educators, and providers. Congress has provided federal resource centers to assist states in implementing evidence-based mental health services in schools. The U.S. has also funded American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund that expanded the number of school based social workers, counselors, nurses, and psychologist to support students.

Across New Mexico

Student Data

In 2017, New Mexico high school students engaged in risky behaviors at higher rates than the national average. According to the Public Education Department (PED), New Mexico is also leading the nation in suicide rates in youth 10 to 17 years of age. As of June 2023, the Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health stated New Mexico ranks 47th in the nation for youth mental health and only 59 percent of New Mexican children with a mental or behavioral health condition are receiving appropriate treatment.

New Mexico Efforts

In February 2006, the PED, via the New Mexico Administrative Code, implemented the Primary and Secondary Education Public School Administration, Health and Safety School District Wellness Policy (See 6.12.6 NMAC). The policy required school districts and charter schools to create a plan that addresses students' behavioral health needs in educational processes, with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing. Since then, community entities, school districts, and charter schools have used a diverse set of mental and behavioral supports, intervention strategies, and prevention mechanisms to best serve students. Schools are funding school-based health centers, counselors, psychologists, and social workers, or alternatively, schools are finding support through their community to provide appropriate resources and services to their students. PED has responded to the mental and behavioral health crisis by providing several forms of support to districts including the following;

- The department has mental health and behavioral health resources that help students in mental crisis and supports efforts to identify signs of stress, help youth experiencing homelessness, and provide support for LGBTQ+ youth. PED shares resources for essential services such as the free NM Connect phone application, which is a 24-hour support service for individuals who may need venting or mental health referrals.
- PED created an at-risk intervention response team to provide support to school districts and charter schools to improve educational outcomes for at-risk students. The team has three branches of support: the Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Coordinator, an At-Risk Program Coordinator, and the *Martinez-Yazzie* Response Team.

The University of New Mexico and the New Mexico Department of Health have also demonstrated efforts in trying to increase mental and behavioral health treatment and interventions among youth.

- On June 23, 2023, the University of New Mexico Health and Health Sciences launched the Project ECHO model to provide health care professionals with the appropriate tools and resources need to diagnose and treat children with mental health concerns, regardless of where the child lives.
- The New Mexico Department of Health also houses an Office of School and Adolescent Health dedicated to improving all student and adolescent health through school-based or school-linked services. School-based health clinics are a resource for many students. This year, the legislature passed SB397 to broadly support school-based health clinics through funding, technical assistance, and clinical oversight for any community or school that chooses to implement them.

When schools provide mental and behavioral health services either through direct services or referrals, they reduce barriers to necessary interventions and treatment for students and their families.

Potential Prevention and Intervention

Conscious Discipline. Conscious Discipline is a research-based program that uses social and emotional learning as the foundation to help students cope with their own behavior and emotions allowing a healthy development of self-regulation. The program has improved students' self-regulation in classroom settings and at home, the quality of teacher and student interactions, and academic readiness. Some of New Mexico's prekindergarten and kindergarten programs have individually adopted Conscious Discipline. The program can be found in local communities such as Farmington, Albuquerque, Tijeras, Sunland Park, Ruidoso, Mescalero, and Carlsbad.

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is an evidence-based framework that also aims to support student behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental wellbeing. By combining community, family, and student collaboration, this enables schools to develop culturally responsive practices and goals to reduce schools' use of exclusionary discipline practices. PBIS has been shown to improve students' social and emotional competence, behavioral outcomes, and academic success, as well as factors such as school climate and teacher wellbeing. In 2021, the Region 9 Education Cooperative (REC9) shared training webinars on PBIS and resources on how to implement the framework.

Handle with Care Program. The Handle with Care program is a trauma-informed response to children's exposure to trauma. The Handle with Care program employs a system of communication between law enforcement, schools, and mental health professionals to support student safety and protection, and to help them heal and thrive. The goal of the program is to help students succeed in school by preventing children's exposure to trauma, mitigating negative effects of witnessing trauma, and increasing awareness of child exposure to trauma. Albuquerque has shown high interest in implementing this program with support from Bernalillo County. An attempt was made to start the program but was abruptly stopped due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Policy Considerations

Considering the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to support schools and students, the Legislature should consider continued funding for behavioral and mental health support. The body appropriated \$5 million in FY24 for targeted behavioral health supports. LESC is recommending a similar, dedicated amount for FY25. Similarly, the legislature can continue to fund school-based health clinics.

With continued, targeted funding, in addition to sustained at-risk funding in the state equalization guarantee, schools can implement evidence-based programs that address student mental and behavioral health effectively and strengthen capacity building for mental and behavioral health professionals within school settings. Supporting students' mental and behavioral wellbeing will lead to positive student outcomes and equal educational opportunities.